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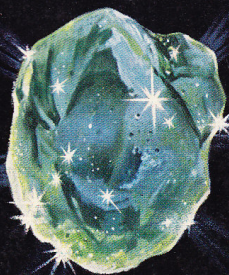
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FIRE PEARL

MAGIC GEM FROM THE MOON

Richard J. H. de Touché-Skadding with John Carlova

THE FANTASTIC HUNT FOR A FABULOUS, PRICELESS
JEWEL THAT WAS THE REWARD OF A THIRTY-YEAR SEARCH!



In his Introduction, Richard de Touché-Skadding says:

This is the true story of my search for a fabulous stone—a “fire pearl” that fell to earth from outer space. My quest began more than 30 years ago, when I was a young sea trader in the Far East. In my travels around India, Burma, Malaya, Borneo, the East Indies, and China, I repeatedly heard of a “magic gem” reputed to be a “teardrop from the moon.” This stone, known by the Sanskrit name of *Agni Mani*, had a history of power, violence, and romance.

Since, at the time, I suspected there was as much superstition as science in Oriental astrology, I was left somewhat skeptical. [Yet] I finally found my “magic gem”—but not until I had gone through a typhoon, outwitted Chinese pirates, put down a mutiny on my ship, pushed through jungles never before penetrated by a white man, talked my way out of a “death penalty,” become romantically involved on a couple of occasions, schemed an entry to the palace of a potentate who owned an *Agni Mani*, uncovered an ancient temple treasure, and been shipwrecked in the Java Sea.

Today these adventures seem incredible even to myself. Yet they happened—and I have documents, mementos, and scars to prove them, as well as a number of fire pearls. . . .



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**Richard J. H. de Touché-Skadding
with John Carlova**

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Introduction

This is the true story of my search for a fabulous stone—a “fire pearl” that fell to earth from outer space. My quest began more than 30 years ago, when I was a young sea trader in the Far East. In my travels around India, Burma, Malaya, Borneo, the East Indies, and China, I repeatedly heard of a “magic gem” reputed to be a “teardrop from the moon.” This stone, known by the Sanskrit name of *Agni Mani*, had a history of power, violence, and romance. Kingdoms had been conquered, dynasties overturned, and fortunes won by emperors, warlords, and adventurers in possession of one of these rare jewels.

Fascinated, I delved deep into ancient Oriental documents on the *Agni Mani*. In the Chinese Tang Annals, going back more than 2,000 years, I found the stone mentioned as *Huoh Chuh*; in Indian records it was called *Saimantakmani*, the sacred gem of Lord Krishna; in Javanese history it was referred to as *Kumbalageni*; and in Tibet it was named *Shambala* and worshipped by Buddhist priests.

These names all mean approximately the same thing—“fire pearl,” a designation originated by Eastern astrologers who claimed the stones were “teardrops from the moon” that had plunged through space in fiery form. The lunar particles were said to have been thrown off by the impact of a meteor crashing into the moon.

Since, at the time, I suspected there was as much superstition as science in Oriental astrology, I was left somewhat skeptical. My adventurous Viking blood was stirred, however, and I set out to find a fire pearl. This grew into an obsession, an almost mystic compulsion that drove me across the seas and lands of Asia. I finally found my “magic gem”—and a handful of others as well—but not until I had gone

through a typhoon, outwitted Chinese pirates, put down a mutiny on my ship, pushed through jungles never before penetrated by a white man, talked my way out of a "death penalty" imposed on me by a half-mad Eurasian gambling queen, become romantically involved on a couple of occasions, schemed an entry to the palace of a potentate who owned an *Agni Mani*, uncovered an ancient temple treasure, and been shipwrecked in the Java Sea.

Today these adventures seem incredible even to myself. Yet they happened—and I have documents, mementos, and scars to prove them, as well as a number of fire pearls. I also have the satisfaction of knowing that these stones do indeed come from the moon. For, although my find was hailed throughout the Far East, it was hardly noticed in the Western world. It was not until 1947 that Dr. Harvey Nininger, Director of the American Meteorite Association, definitely confirmed the age-old Oriental theory—that my "moon jewels" were lunar fragments sent showering to earth by the impact of a meteor.

Since then there has been intense study, interest, and search for such tektites, as the stones are scientifically known. The best specimens are jet-black in color, with strange grooves and craters sculptured into the glistening hard surface. The edges are occasionally highlighted by an apparently live green flame—a phenomenon explained by the fact that the gems are tinged with radioactivity. Some scientists now believe that radioactivity can influence human behavior, and this could account for many of the magical claims made for fire pearls.

In any event, these jewels—valued at five times the cost of top-quality diamonds—are today considered the world's foremost good-luck charm. Personally, since acquiring my first *Agni Mani*, I have prospered as a businessman, explorer, and mineralogist. I state this as a fact, not as a claim to any "magic" the stone might possess. The following cases are cited in the same manner:

In the darkest days of World War II, when I was serving with an Allied intelligence agency in India, I presented Lord Louis Mountbatten with an *Agni Mani*. Six days later Lord Louis launched his now historic invasion of Burma, a highly successful campaign that turned the tide of battle against the Japanese. The fire pearl is still one of Lord Louis's most prized possessions.

Another Mountbatten, the Duke of Edinburgh, became greatly interested in the "magic gem." When he married Princess Elizabeth, who is now the Queen of England, I attended the wedding and presented the royal couple with an *Agni Mani*. The stone, set in a jewel-studded necklace, attracted more attention than any of the other wedding gifts displayed at Buckingham Palace. It has since been worn frequently by the Queen—and the success of her reign, of course, is a matter of common knowledge. I also presented an *Agni Mani* to another great Briton, Sir Winston Churchill.

In another sphere, the scientific study of outer space, the *Agni Mani* is attracting its greatest attention of all. On November 20, 1957, the Smithsonian Institution Astrophysical Observatory published a report which stated, "Astronomical considerations prove that the moon is a very likely source compatible with the observed distribution of tektites on the earth. Therefore we believe that these peculiar objects may well be, indeed, fragments of lunar material that reached our planet. . . ."

In other words, during all the centuries that man has wondered about the mysteries of the moon, particles of that celestial body lay scattered over the earth. My purpose in life, it would seem, was to find and help bring to the attention of science these chips from the moon.

Man's history is a chronicle of continuing quest. My contribution—told here from the adventurous years of my youth to the important outer space research in which I am engaged today—may well help to make the history of tomorrow.

—Richard J. H. de Touché-Skadding



CHAPTER I

The spell of China is a strange mixture of enchantment and horror. I have felt it often but never more so than one evening as I stood on the docks at Canton. I was working as a customs inspector at the time, 1927, and I had just finished my tour of duty for the day. In the delicate pink twilight the Pearl River looked like a liquid flow of roses.

It was an illusion, of course. Beneath its false sheen, the river was foul and filthy. Junks, freighters, barges, and warships jammed its muddy shores. The smell of spices intermingled with the stench of garbage. A cock and two hens perched on the bamboo roof of a passing sampan. A woman with a baby tied to her back propelled the craft with a stern-mounted oar, while her husband tended a pot of boiling rice.

The waterfront was crawling with such floating homes, as though the crowded shores could not hold the swarming population. In the narrow streets and out over the countryside spilled the moving dark columns of Chinese, ant-like in their activity, silent in their stoic misery. Yet, above it all, like a beautiful dream, loomed the misty White Cloud Mountains. This was China—squalid and magnificent, cruel and mystic, starved and magical. . . .

"Mr. Skadding?"

I turned. A coolie was bowing so obsequiously that I could see only the top of his conical-shaped hat.

"Yes," I replied in Cantonese, "I'm Skadding. What do you wish?"

The coolie held out a basket, tightly bound with wicker bands. "I was told to give you this. It is a present."

I accepted the basket. As a customs officer, I was frequently given gifts by shipowners or traders who wanted to keep on my good side. In graft-ridden China this was not considered bribery—just good business.

"Who sent this?" I asked.

There was no reply. The coolie had scuttled away and, rat-like, disappeared somewhere beneath the docks.

"What the hell—" I muttered in English.

"Having trouble, Richard?"

It was Gus Galneek, who had been my companion in more than a half dozen years of roaming the Orient. Gus was now working for a trading firm in Canton, and we met every evening on the docks to return together to our apartment. I told him about the basket and the peculiar manner in which it had been presented to me.

"Well, let's see what's in it," said Gus, taking the basket from me.

Expertly he unfastened the wicker bands, flipped open the lid, and then gave an involuntary gasp. Inside the basket was a human head, eyes still open but rolled upward in death. Dried blood clotted the bristly hair and streaked the coarse jowls.

"Shubert!" shrieked Gus and dropped the basket. The head spilled out and rolled across the dock. Shocked as I was, I could not stand this indignity to human remains. I snatched up the basket, ran after the head, kneeled down, and, repressing my revulsion, prodded the grisly object back into its container. Almost frantically I slammed the lid down, shutting off the gruesome sight.

Then I found I could not stand up. I felt sick, and my legs had no strength at all. I could only crouch there, staring up at Gus. In moments of stress or danger I have a habit of becoming sharply perceptive. I had known Gus all my life, but now, for the first time, I noticed that he had a faint sprinkling of freckles on his forehead, rising up into his sparse, curly blond hair. Perhaps it was his pallor that had brought out the freckles. Even his full, usually laughing lips were bloodless. His eyes bulged behind his gold-rimmed glasses.

"Is it . . . was it . . . Shubert?" he finally managed to whisper.

I nodded. Shubert had been my assistant, a gross, rather unpleasant German who had made many enemies among the smugglers and pirates of Canton. I had made a few enemies of my own. The head had undoubtedly been presented to me as a warning.

"Come on," I said. "We'd better go to the police."

Somehow I found the strength to rise. Silently we walked back through the gloomy warehouses, Gus keeping a little away from me and my macabre burden. The police were more appreciative. At the station, constables and officials crowded around to chortle and giggle at the absurdity of

Shubert's bodyless head. To the Chinese, death is a kind of bad joke. No matter how ghastly it may be, they always find something laughable in it.

Angered, I shoved the ghoulish onlookers away and demanded of the station commandant, "Aren't you going to do something about this?"

The commandant was a big, Buddha-like Cantonese who had been educated in England. "My dear fellow," he replied in his incongruous Oxford accent, "what is there to do? Have you any idea who killed Shubert?"

"Smugglers, probably, or pirates."

"Ah, yes, but which smugglers or pirates? There are so many, and they all disliked Shubert so heartily. He was warned, you know. I told him myself. I said, 'Shubert, don't press these people too far. They can be nasty.' I warned him."

This was probably true. The commandant, like all officials in Canton, was in the pay of the pirates and smugglers. He would do nothing to find the murderers of Shubert, and I knew it. I suddenly felt helpless.

"All right," I said, "do what you can. Will you take care of the head and notify the proper authorities?"

"Of course, old fellow." The commandant's eyes glittered maliciously. "And if I may offer a word of advice, I believe *you* should get out of the customs service. The fact that the head was presented to you constitutes a direct warning. Somebody powerful dislikes you. I think you should resign."

I was thinking the same thing, but I wasn't going to let him know. Indignantly I demanded, "What—and lose face?"

The Chinese grinned slyly. "Better to lose face, old fellow, than your head."

He was a comedian. Under different circumstances, he might have got a laugh out of me. As it was, I had the chilling sensation that my neck was about to be slashed. It was all I could do to keep from clutching my throat.

"Only frightened chickens lose their heads," I told the commandant, misquoting a Cantonese proverb and speaking much more bravely than I felt. "And I am hardly a frightened chicken."

He nodded sagely. "Of course, old fellow—but even a brave chicken knows when to run."

You can't beat the Chinese at their own proverbs, or deny

their wisdom. I shrugged and turned to Gus. "Come on—let's get out of here."

Outside, we hailed a rickshaw and, in the dusk, headed for home. As we rolled through the dim, tortuous streets, a jumble of dark shapes drifted past us. Lanterns were being lighted, and the activity of evening was beginning. Neither Gus nor I spoke. I don't know what he was thinking. I was thinking about the events that had brought me to this bizarre land and placed me under the threat of violent death.

I was born in Riga, Latvia, just at the turn of the 20th century. My father was a French nobleman; my mother was of English and Viking extraction. On both sides of my family I come from a long line of scholars and adventurers. One of my ancestors was a Templar knight who distinguished himself during the Crusades. Another, a Marquis de Touché, was a confidant of kings.

True to my heritage, I grew up in search of knowledge and excitement. I studied history and languages at Heidelberg University, and when the Russian Bolsheviks invaded Latvia, I joined the fight to drive them out. It was during this short but fierce war that Gus Galneek and I became close friends.

After the war Gus and I went into the Latvian diplomatic service. We worked in Berlin and then Rome, but I found the life dissatisfying. I felt restless, troubled. Postwar Europe was cynical, decadent, and dispirited. All around me I could see this moral sickness infecting the people I knew, particularly those of the aristocracy. I wanted to flee, to find new horizons, new worlds, new and more satisfying dimensions to life.

There was also a personal problem. Although I was proud of my noble background, I sometimes felt overshadowed by it. I was anxious to prove myself as an individual.

But how and where? I hesitated between the new world of the Americas and the ancient one of the Orient. The little-known past has always appealed to me, and I finally decided to try the Far East. Gus promptly said he'd go with me.

We had practically no money, but that didn't stop us. In Naples one day in 1921, we stowed away aboard a freighter bound for India. We managed to remain hidden in a canvas-covered lifeboat until the ship reached the Red Sea. There the intense heat drove us into the open—and we spent the rest of

the voyage scrubbing decks, polishing brass, and washing dishes.

It was worth it. The moment I stepped ashore at Calcutta, the mysterious grip of the East seized me. Gus found the half-naked dark throngs distasteful, the smells of coconut oil and boiling curry repugnant, but not I. I loved it all—the clamor, the color, the surging, ageless change and flow.

Roaming the city, I discovered unexpected splashes of splendor. In a quiet side street I stood in awe in front of a shop window that glittered with riches. There were wine cups cut from rock crystal and agate, blood-red rubies from Burma, peacock-blue sapphires from Ceylon, flashing diamonds from Africa. I had always been fascinated by gems. Even as a child, according to a story my mother often told, I found colored bits of stone more beautiful than flowers.

On an impulse I went into the shop and asked to see the proprietor. I was surprised when a Burmese woman appeared, wearing Western dress but smoking a long black cigar.

"Yes?" she said in English. "What can I do for you?"

"You can give me a job," I blurted.

She took the cigar out of her mouth and regarded me critically. "You are young. Do you know anything about gems?"

"Very little," I admitted, "but I speak French, English, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, and Russian. I would be good for your tourist trade."

She nodded in agreement. "When can you start work?"

"Right now!"

That was the beginning of my career as a gem trader. I worked in that shop for nearly a year, waiting on customers, studying jewels, reading histories of ancient or unusual stones, listening to the stories of the many and varied people who came to the shop. Among these was a Yogi named Ram Gyani, a tall, lean Hindu of indeterminate age. He wore what appeared to be a spotless sheet draped ingeniously about his shoulders and between his legs, and his long white hair and thick, frosty eyebrows contrasted dramatically with the darkness of his skin and eyes.

The first time I met Ram, he gave me a piercing glance and declared, "You are a son of destiny!"

I thought he was a fortune-teller or one of the many other charlatans who frequently came into the shop. I automatically felt to make sure my wallet was still safely in my pocket.

The Yogi understood my gesture. He smiled and said, "Your fortune is in your stars—not in your purse."

"Perhaps," I said, "but stars won't buy me food. I have to work to eat, and I'm busy right now." I brushed past the Yogi. "You'll have to excuse me."

Later, when I had attended to several customers and gone to the workroom in back of the shop, I was surprised to find Ram sitting there, respectfully surrounded by the proprietor and a number of Indian gem cutters. The Yogi, one of the Indians reverently whispered to me, was a true "holy man" and a great scholar. I felt a bit of a fool, and at the earliest opportunity I apologized to Ram. After that we became good friends.

One day, while strolling through a bazaar, we stopped to watch an Indian juggler climb a 20-foot ladder into which knife blades had been fitted in place of rungs. The juggler, barefoot, stopped his ascent from time to time to entertain the crowd with tricks that involved the balancing of other knives. Then he came down the ladder, stamping each knife blade with his bare feet. Yet when he turned up his soles for the crowd to examine, they were unmarked. I personally verified the cutting qualities of the knives. They were razor-sharp.

"How did he do that?" I asked Ram. "Is it really magic?"

The Yogi nodded. "A kind of magic of the mind. In the West you call it self-hypnosis."

The explanation was not entirely satisfactory to me. "I don't see how a man's mind can keep his feet from bleeding."

"No?" said Ram, smiling indulgently. "Well, of course, you men of the West do not believe what you cannot understand. You are more interested in machines than in the mind."

"Not me!" I protested. "I'm here in the East because I want to know more about the mind, the spirit, mysticism, magic, philosophy, history, everything!"

My outburst seemed both to amuse and to impress the Yogi. He took me by the arm, led me to a nearby café, and after we had sat down, said, "Richard, you are young and eager. There are so many things I would like to teach you—but time grows short. In a few days I shall be one hundred years old."

I was amazed. Ram looked no more than 60.

"You can't be a hundred!" I said. "Why, you can outwalk and outthink me! You're so lively, physically and mentally!"

Ram smiled. "It is true that years do not matter if the spirit remains young. A child may be born in an old house. The trouble is, there have been too many children born in this old house of mine. The structure still looks firm, but the foundations are failing." The Yogi seemed tired, sad. "My only regret is that I shall not be able to achieve the greatest ambition of my life—to find and worship the sacred stone of Lord Krishna, the *Agni Mani*."

My interest quickened. I had heard of this "magic gem," and I knew Ram had done tremendous research on it. This was the first time, however, that he had ever mentioned it to me.

I found the courage to ask, "Just what is an *Agni Mani*?"

"A jewel of great power sent from the heavens. It fell to earth from the moon."

"How do you know?"

"It is written in many scriptures of the East and confirmed by astrologers."

I was skeptical. "What's so wonderful about this stone?"

"Power and fortune come to him who possesses it, and his seed shall live until the end of the world. He who owns it can look into the future."

"Do you really believe that?" I demanded. "European fairy tales are filled with such legends, but nobody believes them."

"The gift of belief must be earned," Ram told me. "I have worked and studied hard to earn mine. Would you like to benefit from my findings on the *Agni Mani*?"

My scholarly instincts were aroused. "I certainly would!"

Thus began my voluminous studies on the *Agni Mani*. By checking and cross-checking references, I traced three of the stones through the ages—one to an emperor of China, one to a sultan in Malaya, and the other to a potentate in Java. The stones had originally been found, as close as I could make out from astrologers' estimates, somewhere in the Malayan archipelago. The modern whereabouts of the "magic gems" were unknown:

By this time I was convinced that such stones did exist. A fever to find one grew in me—slowly at first, then strongly.

"To find, you must seek," Ram told me. "But do not expect easy success. I have spent a lifetime in seeking—and all I have is a few grains of knowledge to pass on to you."

"I have not your patience," I admitted. "I want to find an

Agni Mani quickly. It's become important to me, if only to look at one, to feel it. Most of all, I want to own one!"

My youthful intensity caused Ram to smile. "A year's drought is washed away by a day's rain, and an hour's joy drives out the pain of a month's sorrow. It will take you long years, Richard, but you will find your *Agni Mani*."

I was astonished. "How do you know?"

"Because you have learned to believe what you cannot fully understand, because you have set yourself a goal, and because you are a son of destiny. I saw it in your eyes the first time I met you."

A few months previously, such "fortune-teller's talk" would have amused or annoyed me or made me feel uneasy. Now I had come to believe, in part at least, in Ram's "magic of the mind."

As though sensing my receptivity, the Yogi took my hand and indicated a ring I wore. "Will you permit me to hold this for a few minutes?"

"Of course." I took off the ring and gave it to Ram. We were in his apartment, and he sat on the floor cross-legged in an attitude of Yoga meditation. He held the ring close to his chest, his eyes upraised, gazing steadily at a single white flower that stood in a slender vase. I had a strange sensation that time was taking the form of a long, bright corridor, leading both forward and back.

Ram's voice, when he spoke, was almost toneless. "This ring is old—hundreds of years old. It once belonged to a king, but then it held a stone different from the one it has now. This present stone will be replaced by another—the most precious of all. . . ."

I must carefully sort my feelings from the facts in this incident. I had never told anyone, not even Gus, about the history of the ring, and there was no way the Yogi could have known of it. Actually, the ring was a gold and silver ancestral piece about 200 years old. It had once belonged to King Philip V of Spain and had been set with his carved seal. The seal had been lost and had been replaced with an amethyst.

Ram, it would seem, had traveled both backward and forward along the corridor of time. His prophecy—that another stone, "the most precious of all," would replace the amethyst—greatly excited me. I was sure it would be an *Agni Mani*, and I could hardly wait to start my search for it. Gus, who had

been working as an accountant for a British firm in Calcutta, was also eager to get out of India.

On the advice of Ram, who shortly afterward retired to spend the rest of his life in meditation in the mountains of northern India, Gus and I invested our savings in gems. Trading in these, we spent the next few years traveling through Burma, Siam, Malaya, the East Indies, and China. To my knowledge of European languages I added Malay, some Javanese, and several of the Chinese dialects. To my knowledge of the *Agni Mani*, I added much new information—but nothing direct enough to lead me to one of the legendary stones.

My constant preoccupation with finding a fire pearl annoyed Gus.

"You should get out and have a good time!" he kept telling me.

"You have a good enough time for both of us," was my usual reply—and it was quite true. Gus's indiscriminate enthusiasm for wine, women, and song contributed considerably to the fact that we eventually wound up nearly broke in Shanghai.

Fortunately, I had made a number of helpful friends. Among these was the great Chinese patriot, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who was trying to unite his country against the warlords who had carved it into separate domains. Dr. Sun gave me a personal introduction to General Wu Ting Fang, the governor of Canton. Because of my knowledge of languages, I was given a job in the customs service.

It was my duty to board incoming ships and check them for contraband, particularly opium and firearms. Frankly, it was a great opportunity to make money. Along with the salary and presents I received, I was entitled to a share of the value of any contraband seized. And there was plenty of contraband coming into Canton, most of it carried by pirates and smugglers. My diligence in sniffing out opium and ferreting out firearms soon had me in the bad books of the pirates.

Piracy, it should be understood, was more of a profession than a crime in the China of those days. It involved smuggling and kidnapping as well as robbery at sea. I personally knew—and in some instances even liked—a number of pirate leaders. I never met one who carried a dagger and swaggered about as a buccaneer is supposed to do. In fact, the

more successful pirate chiefs could often be found in the lounges of the best hotels, graciously entertaining civic, military, business, and political leaders. They looked and dressed like any other prosperous Chinese. They were devout in the performance of religious rites, fond of children, and honest in the fulfillment of business obligations. Their power and influence stemmed from their close affiliation with the warlords.

Although these pirate leaders were generally well-known—much as American gangsters were well-known during Prohibition—they were almost untouchable. They carefully paid protective tribute to the police and military, and unless they set off some particularly outrageous international incident, the pirates were not bothered too much. They even had a guild, a kind of trade union, of their own.

As a customs inspector, I sometimes had difficulty in distinguishing between a pirate junk and any other Chinese trading vessel. The ships and crews looked much alike, except that some pirates wore the uniform of the warlord who happened to be their protector. Whenever I spotted such uniforms, I immediately started combing the ship for firearms. That's what the warlords wanted from the pirate-smugglers.

I also developed a nose for *chandu*, as opium in its raw state is known. All I needed was a whiff of that sickly-sweet odor and I was off like a bird dog. Once, hot on the trail of what I was sure would be a highly profitable haul of opium, I foolishly dropped through a manhole into the bilge of a freighter. A Chinese crewman promptly slammed the cover shut and screwed it down. I was trapped in a damp, dark, confined, rat-infested dungeon at the very bottom of the ship.

At first I was merely angered. Crouching, for there was not enough room to stand erect, I swept my flashlight around my prison. Rodents scuttled to escape the beam, and their wicked little eyes glittered at me. In revulsion I stepped back and leaned against a wall of sweaty iron. The stink of the stagnant bilge turned my stomach.

Worry replaced my anger. I had come aboard with two other customs agents, both Chinese. And both, I was quite sure, would accept bribes from the ship's officers to go away and conveniently forget about me. At a later date my dead body could be removed from its tomb and dropped overboard at sea.

Fear grew out of my worry, and I began to shout. My voice

echoed mockingly within the iron walls. No one on the docks, I knew, could hear me. Without thinking, I banged my flashlight against the steel cover above me. The bulb shattered, and the light went out, leaving me in total darkness.

There is a split second, just before panic sets in, when the human brain seems to flash a last warning: Keep calm. I caught myself at that moment and, with an effort, kept myself from going to pieces. If I was to be saved at all, I realized, I had to form a plan of action and follow it. Shouting was useless. The ship, however, with its echoing steel and iron, might serve as a drum. I could beat on it with the flashlight.

Methodically, although stumblingly, my back and shoulders aching from my crouched position, I moved about the bilge, pounding at intervals on the iron walls: I seemed to be making a tremendous din. Yet, I knew, I was deep inside and at the very bottom of the drum. The sound might or might not carry outside.

I was gasping for breath now, stifled not only by the bilge but by a stench I knew only too well: *chandu* parceled in fish sacks. I bumped into the valuable haul in a corner, fastened to the walls to keep it clear of the foul water slopping about my feet. The cruel irony of my discovery nearly made me laugh.

Still I kept going, steadily rapping at the walls. In the pitch blackness, where every minute was an hour, I seemed to stumble about for a lifetime. Actually it was about six hours. Then, exhausted, nearly unconscious from lack of air, sprawled in the filthy bilge, I heard hurried footsteps overhead. The steel cover above me clanged open.

"Richard!" a voice called. "Are you down there?"

It was Gus, good old Gus. Worried when I had not met him on the docks as usual, he had started a search. Aided by a group of French marines, he had finally traced me to my prison.

"You saved my life, Gus," I told him after I had been carried into the customs office and revived.

He grinned. "Now, we're even."

I knew what he meant. During the war against the Russian Bolsheviks, Gus had been captured by a Red patrol. I had set fire to the barn in which the patrol was quartered and in the confusion had helped Gus to escape.

Now, in the crowded office, I could see a number of customs men standing behind Gus. Among them were the Chinese

agents who had accompanied me earlier in the day. Both were grinning sheepishly.

"You bastards!" I swore at them. "Why did you leave me aboard that ship?"

"We thought you had gone ashore," one protested weakly. He was lying, and I knew it. They had been bribed by the ship's officers, all right, but proving it was another matter.

I suddenly sat up. "My God, the opium!" I grabbed my cap and ran for the door, calling to the other customs men, "Come on! There's contraband aboard that ship!"

We got there just in time. The smugglers had carried the opium up from the bilge and were trying to hustle it ashore. They literally ran right into our arms. My commission for uncovering the contraband was the largest I ever received.

Sometimes I wondered if the risk was worth the reward. I was playing a highly dangerous game, hoping to amass enough money to buy a ship of my own. In that way, I had figured, I could make a living by trading as I sailed the China seas, following up various leads on the *Agni Mani*. The trouble was, I well knew, I might die abruptly before my dream could come true.

The only thing that saved me, I believe now, is that I played my dangerous game by a code of ethics that even the pirates could appreciate. Although I accepted the customary presents from shipowners and businessmen, I never took any bribes from pirates or smugglers. I was out to make my money by uncovering contraband, and I never pretended otherwise.

Shubert played the game differently. He tried to benefit from both sides. He took bribes from the pirates, then turned around and raided their ships for contraband. That's why he had been killed.

The rickshaw lurched over a pothole in the road, throwing me against Gus and bringing me back to the present. I looked around in the darkness. We were approaching the bridge to tree-lined Shameen Island, a three-quarter-mile strip of international territory under the joint jurisdiction of the French and British.

I always felt better when I crossed over to Shameen. It was as though I were leaving the dangers of my job, pirates and corrupt Chinese officials, behind me. The bridge was well guarded, and, as usual, we were stopped and our credentials

checked. Then we were allowed to go on to our apartment, which was on the top floor of a modern building overlooking the Pearl River and the lights of Canton.

Our *amah*, a plump, pleasant, motherly Cantonese, had dinner waiting for us. After washing up and changing our clothes, we sat down to shark's fin soup, sweet-and-sour fish, roast duck, and noodles. Gus heartily went to work with his chopsticks. Even with his mouth full, he somehow managed to hum the music for the Charleston, a dance craze that had spread to the Orient.

The man's resilience amazed me. He had apparently already forgotten about Shubert.

"What're you so chipper about?" I asked.

Gus grinned. "Got a heavy date."

"Who's it this time?"

"Nadya Nadarova."

Nadya was a White Russian refugee who had married one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in South China—a burly, brutal merchant named Tan Kai Yu.

I put down my chopsticks and stared at Gus. "Have you gone crazy?"

"Why?" he asked innocently.

"Tan will murder you if he ever finds out you're seeing his wife."

Gus grinned smugly. "The old boy happens to be in Hong Kong on business. Besides, Nadya and I are very discreet. We meet in secret."

"You'll get your throat slit in secret, too!"

Gus's grin broadened. "Oh, really? Well, Richard, what about your secret love—your little Ming Lei?"

He had me there. Ming Lei was the daughter of one of my best friends, a fine old Chinese gem trader named Khoo Ah Lim. In those days only Chinese prostitutes and cabaret girls appeared in public with white men. To save Ming's face, as well as her father's, I met her in secret.

"That's different," I told Gus, none too strongly.

He laughed and got up. "Oh, sure! It's a sin when I do something—it's different when you do it! You have a very convenient way of thinking, Richard!"

I had no comeback. Gus pulled on his natty white sharkskin jacket, tilted his Panama hat at a rakish angle, waved goodbye to me, and went off to keep his risky rendezvous.

I shook my head and smiled to myself. Gus was reckless

but gay, and you couldn't help liking him. After all, in a way, he was only taking chances that I myself took every day. He was facing danger for love—I was doing it to make a dream come true. Who could say which of us was wise or foolish?

Shortly before nine, I left the apartment and walked through the soft darkness to a point near the end of the island. Even at night the river was busy. A liner slowly moved downstream, its lights leaping and shimmering on the ebony water. Sampans drifted past like silent black ghosts. The hearth-cover aboard a junk was suddenly thrown open, flinging a fierce, flamelike reflection up over the bat-shaped sails of the craft.

Exactly at nine a sampan approached the embankment where I stood. The front curtain of the bamboo cabin was closed, but, through an opening at the rear, a red paper lantern cast a dusky glow over a Chinese girl standing at the stern. The soft pink sheen highlighted the top of the girl's yellow silk coat, which, from the waist down, was shaded by the midnight-blue of the river.

The girl waved to me, and I waved back. She was Ming Lei's *mui tsai*, a term that is typically Chinese. Literally translated, it means "little sister." Actually it denotes a slave girl or bonded servant. Wealthy Chinese bought such "little sisters" to perform household chores, or, as in Ming's case, to act as a kind of working companion for a daughter or son.

Skillfully, the *mui tsai* manipulated the oar at the stern of the sampan, edging the prow up to the slippery stones of the embankment. I stepped aboard as cautiously as I could, but my weight still rocked the frail vessel. Inside the cabin, I heard Ming Lei laugh—a tinkling sound which to me always seemed to be a silvery echo of temple bells. "Oh, Richard, do be careful. You are too much of a giant for our toy boats of China."

I opened the curtain to the cabin, then crouched there in the entrance, spellbound. The interior was a dazzling explosion of scarlet. Wine-colored tapestries covered the walls, and the floor was piled with crimson cushions. Ming Lei, gracefully reclining on the cushions, was wearing a red silk tunic and trousers. In the ruby glow of the lantern, she was smiling at me—so sweetly that I was entranced, as I always was entranced, by her strange appearance of serenity and passion.

Ming fascinated me in the same way that fine jewels fascinated me. She was slender and yet, for a Chinese girl,

richly formed. Her face, with its exquisite features, might have been carved out of perfect ivory. In contrast, her lively, almond-shaped eyes seemed to have been etched in India ink, and her hair was as sleek and black as onyx. Her lips, miniature petals, alternated between pink and cherry, depending on her mood.

She patted the cushions beside her. "I think you would be more comfortable here, Richard."

I moved alongside Ming, careful not to crush her with my bulky shoulders. An unruly lock of hair had fallen over my forehead, and tenderly she brushed it back. Her hand lingered in my hair, and her eyes, like fireflies in velvety darkness, seemed to search my face restlessly.

"Are you all right, Richard?"

"Of course."

Close to Ming, I could smell the heady perfume of jasmine. A single white frangipani flower had been fastened in her hair, and this, too, I could smell as I leaned down to kiss her. Behind us, the *mui tsai* discreetly dropped the rear curtain to the cabin, and the sampan floated slowly downstream.

As I drew away from Ming, her face seemed a poetic blur, perhaps caused by the pounding of blood in my temples. Yet, as always, she instilled in me a strange feeling of peace.

"You are a red lotus," I told her, quoting a Cantonese poem, "floating on dark waters."

She smiled, a little sadly, her delicate fingers caressing my cheek. "And you, Richard, are a handsome tree that has become too exposed to storms. I would die if you were to topple. . . ."

This was her way of telling me she knew of the latest pirate warning.

"You've heard about Shubert?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes, and you must not suffer the same fate, Richard. Resign from your job at the customs."

"I have a goal to attain," I reminded her, "and I shall not be frightened from it."

"You mean the ship you wish to buy—and the fire pearl you hope one day to find?"

"Yes." I smiled at her, more bravely than I felt. "And the face I wish to save. If I quit the customs now, everyone will say I am a coward. You can understand the honor involved."

Ming's smile turned enigmatic. "Honor is like money. It can be saved in many ways."

"What does that mean?"

"That my father is concerned about you, Richard. He spoke about you only this evening to Mah Fong, the shipping agent. Mah Fong has agreed to advance you whatever additional money you need to buy a trading ship."

I was astonished. Mah Fong was one of the leading shipping agents in South China, with offices in Canton and Hong Kong. "But why should he help me? He doesn't even know me."

"He knows of you, Richard, and that is enough for him." Ming was slyly grinning now, very pleased with herself. "As a shipowner, you will not be allowed to work in the customs. You can resign with honor. Promise me you will do so the first thing in the morning."

"With pleasure!" I laughed, and kissed Ming. Then suddenly we were both serious, looking into each other's eyes.

"The moon will be out now," Ming whispered. "We do not need the lantern. . . ."

Her tunic rustled as she turned to put out the lantern. By mistake, she brightened the light and for a breathtaking moment it really seemed as though the red silk rippling across her shoulders had burst into flames. Then the cabin was dark.

"Let the moonlight in," Ming whispered. "Open the curtain."

I did so, and the creamy moonlight flooded over Ming, giving her a softer, more subdued, infinitely mysterious beauty. One pale hand was outlined against her silken tunic, which now looked purple. The irises of her eyes had turned emerald, and the whites were a pale eggshell blue. Her lips, as I leaned down to kiss them, were mauve. . . .

CHAPTER II

The customs authorities accepted my resignation in a way that reflected both relief and regret. They were glad to get rid of me because, almost inevitably, I would have been

killed by pirates, and such violent deaths were bad for international relations. On the other hand, I had the feeling that my Chinese employers were disappointed to see me walk away unharmed. They would have been interested, I'm sure, to see what charming manner the pirates chose to dispose of me.

I could never completely understand the Chinese—nor could other Europeans who spent long periods of time in the Orient. I once asked an Englishman who had lived in China for more than a quarter of a century if he understood the Chinese character. "I am reasonably certain that I know what an individual Chinese will do in a given situation," he replied, "but I'm damned if I know why he does it."

For instance, in a situation that would make a European weep, a Chinese would be just as likely to giggle. I suppose there's a kind of defense mechanism involved here, just as there is in the mass inertia and stoicism of the Chinese people. As a whole, they always made me think of a vast, ageless black glacier, almost imperceptibly but inexorably sliding over the rocky surface of history. Behind this power, it seemed to me, was a kind of paradoxically passive assault that enabled the Chinese to endure conditions of existence that would have crushed an Occidental.

The greatest Chinese failing, at least in those days, lay in a lack of leadership. There seemed to be a hypersensitivity about taking precedence over others. At a government conference I once attended, no one wanted to speak. There wasn't even a chairman. Finally, after a long, uneasy silence, a few of the officials took turns speaking, but only on polite generalities. Each seemed reluctant to say anything that might be construed as a desire to impose his will on the others. The meeting finally broke up with nothing accomplished. The problem under discussion had been left to time and destiny to solve.

Yet, in the unlikely area of a tennis court, I first saw these ancient inhibitions crumbling. Young Chinese intellectuals, particularly those educated abroad, began to take on European opponents, almost fanatically wielding their rackets to win. Previously, a Chinese would seldom risk defeating a friend at sport and bringing him possible humiliation—or, in his own case, suffering loss of face through defeat.

Ironically, it was these young Chinese intellectuals of the tennis courts—their competitive instincts stiffened by West-

ern sport—who went on to form the backbone of the present Communist regime.

The conflict between Chinese customs and ethics always confused me. An official who thought nothing of taking a bribe—because, after all, it was his age-old right—would starve to death rather than let a debt go unpaid. A wealthy man who pampered his own children would quite casually buy the surplus offspring of the poor and turn them into household slaves. A gambler—and the Chinese are avid gamblers—would stake a small fortune on the turn of a card, yet haggle with a street vendor over a difference of a penny. A father, who considered it his right to deflower the daughters of his servants, would hire thugs to maim or kill anyone who as much as questioned the chastity of his own female issue.

With all this, there was a fundamental honesty and integrity to the Chinese—or at least the old-fashioned Chinese—that impressed me. The word of an honorable Chinese was literally his bond. If he liked you, there was nothing he would not do for you.

This was particularly true of Khoo Ah Lim, Ming Lei's father. He was a frail little old man, almost parchment-like in appearance, but with a wisdom as strong as the ages. All life, it seemed, was reflected in the gems with which he worked. Once as we sat talking in the back of his shop, he took two pieces of jade and placed them on a tray before me.

"Can you tell the difference?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No."

Khoo took one of the gems, a green jade cabochon, and sprinkled it with silica dust. Despite this rough covering, the emeraldlike gleam of the stone forced its way through.

"This gem is like a person of character and culture," Khoo told me. "No matter how hard life may hit him, no matter how much slander or abuse is heaped on him, his quality will be unmistakable."

Koo then took the other stone and, with a cutting tool, removed a top layer of thin green veneer. Underneath was colorless glass.

The old man smiled at me. "This faked gem is like a person without character or culture. No matter how much he may cover his faults with a flashy appearance, there is no quality beneath." Khoo paused to let his words of wisdom sink in. "By learning about gems, Richard, you can learn about peo-

ple. You would do well to examine both most carefully before making any decision about them."

I learned many other things from Khoo—how to tell mutton-fat jade from ordinary white jade, how to distinguish between a pigeon-blood ruby and a spinel, how to split a section of bamboo and use its sharp edges to smooth a tourmaline, how to soak carved agate in honey and heat it, changing the gray color into the bright orange of a carnelian. The same heat process, I found, would transform an indifferent amethyst into a golden quartz-topaz. I also learned that a human hair, held tightly across genuine jade, will not burn when a match applied to it. If the hair burns, the stone is fake.

Khoo and I often discussed the *Agni Mani*. The old gem trader had never seen one of the legendary stones, but he knew much of their history.

"If you ever find one," he told me, "it will almost certainly be in the possession of a potentate or a person of great wealth and power. I would advise you to look among the sultans of Malaya or the royalty of the East Indies—but discreetly. Anyone who has an *Agni Mani* will guard it closely. If you display too great an interest in the stone, your life may be endangered."

It was through Khoo and his scholarly friends that I was permitted to study certain of the Tang Annals. From these I discovered enough new information to narrow my estimate of where the fire pearls had originally been found. This seemed to be somewhere, probably an island, in the Java Sea. I determined to sail to Malaya, then to the East Indies, just as soon as I could buy a trading ship.

Meanwhile Khoo helped me to add to the money I made in the customs service. He gave me generous commissions on any gems I could sell through my European contacts. A fine set of blue chalcedony carvings, which I sold to a British diplomat in Shanghai, eventually found its way into the collection of Queen Mary of England. A double jade necklace, sold by me to a dealer in Hong Kong, later became a prized possession of Italian Princess Cassano.

Yet, with all the money I was making, I could never quite amass enough to buy an ocean-going trading ship. In a way, therefore, the pirates did me a good turn by threatening my life. It was then that Khoo became concerned about my safety

and asked his friend, the shipping agent Mah Fong, to help me.

When I was ushered into Mah Fong's office, he rose, inserted his hands into the broad openings of his coat sleeves, and bowed.

"I am honored, Baron Skadding," he murmured. "Please be seated."

I sat down, and while servants swiftly brought in utensils for the ritual of tea, the shipping agent and I politely smiled at each other. Mah Fong appeared to be in his middle sixties. His bright brown eyes were only partly revealed by slanting lids. Above them, the individual white hairs of his eyebrows stood out like antennae, as though sensitive to the vibrations of others. Hairs also grew out of his nostrils and hung from a "lucky" mole on his cheekbone.

On his head Mah Fong wore a black silk skullcap topped by a red tassel. His blue coat, long and generously cut, had a chrysanthemum pattern. There were other coats beneath, and the collars could be counted at the neck, like the opening petals of a lotus.

Only after all the polite preliminaries had been observed did Mah Fong get down to business.

"Have you ever owned a ship before?" he asked me.

"No, but I have worked on ships and done much sailing. I also have a good knowledge of navigation and trading."

Mah Fong nodded sagely. "I know. Have you any ship in mind that you would like to acquire?"

"Yes, the *Yongmin*. It needs cleaning up, but it's a good, sound craft."

Again the agent nodded. "I agree. An admirable choice. Have you any idea of the price?"

I told him. He smiled. "That is the price to a European. I can buy it at a more reasonable figure. Will you allow me to make the purchase in my own manner?"

"Of course. Do you want my money now?"

"No—we can arrange all that later."

Thus, without a contract or a written agreement of any kind, Mah Fong went ahead and bought the *Yongmin* and registered it at Hong Kong in my name. Only then did I turn over to him the money I had, which came to about three-quarters of the cost of the ship. The other quarter I was to re-

pay to the agent out of the proceeds of my first trading trips.

Gus was as excited as I was about acquiring the *Yongmin*. He quit his job—I had made him a partner in my new venture, of course—and every day we went to the waterfront to supervise the cleaning, painting, and refitting of our ship. She was an oil-burning steamer, 600 tons in weight and 180 feet long. Her speed was ten knots. She had eight deck cabins, three cargo holds, four lifeboats, and a good Scottish engine below.

By the time we had finished with the *Yongmin*, she looked as sleek and beautiful as a pleasure yacht. The saloon and cabins were paneled with teakwood, the bottom was covered with copper, and the entire exterior painted white. To protect ourselves against pirates, we mounted machine guns fore and aft and put aboard a small arsenal of rifles and pistols. Our crew was Chinese, handpicked by Mah Fong himself. We were fortunate, too, in signing on one of the best captains in Southeast Asia, a bronze giant from Tientsin named Chiang.

Everything was wonderful—except that Gus seemed determined on getting himself killed. He was still seeing Nadya Nadarova, even though her husband was back in town. Once, returning home late at night after a rendezvous with Ming Lei, I was angered to find Nadya and Gus in the apartment, drunkenly dancing to the wheezy strains of a phonograph.

"Have you both gone insane?" I demanded. "Everybody in Canton will know what you're doing!"

Nadya lurched away from Gus, flopped backward onto a sofa, waved one languid hand indifferently, and laughed, "Who cares! We're having a good time!"

I didn't know whether to slap some sense into her or feel sorry for her. Nadya had been wealthy and beautiful in the carefree days of the Russian aristocracy. Now, driven from her homeland by the Bolsheviks, bleary-eyed from dissipation, bewildered by the strange ways of fate, in spite of all her forced gaiety she seemed a pathetic creature. In the hope of reviving her former state of glory, she had married wealthy Tan Kai Yu. This had only made her position worse. By marrying a Chinese, she had put herself beyond the pale of the "respectable" whites in China. By the same token, she had become unacceptable to the "respectable" Chinese.

It was only romantic adventurers like Gus who would run the risk of giving Nadya the "good times" she craved.

Fortunately, that night I was able to get her back to her palatial home safely—only because Tan Kai Yu was out on a business party. A few days later I ran into Tan in the lounge of the Victoria Hotel, and, rather pointedly, he asked me how Gus was. I was sure he knew or at least suspected that my reckless friend was running around with his wife. I was relieved when the *Yongmin* was finally ready to sail.

Our first shipment was a load of peanuts, which we carried from Canton to Hong Kong. On the return trip our holds were apparently piled high with bags of rice. Actually, beneath the rice was contraband salt—a commodity that was highly taxed by the Chinese government and therefore a profitable one to smuggle past the customs. Because I knew the customs service so well and was certain none of the agents would strain himself to look beneath the heavy bags of rice, we got through with the salt without any trouble at all.

I applied my proceeds from the trip against the debt I owed Mah Fong.

"A few more trips like that," I gleefully told Gus, "and the *Yongmin* will be all ours. We'll be free to sail to Malaya and the East Indies."

Gus wasn't particularly interested. He could hardly wait to get away and see his latest girl friend, a French dancer who was joyously introducing another phase of Western culture to the Orient: the striptease. I was glad, at least, that Gus's dangerous interest in Nadya was waning.

While I was waiting for the *Yongmin* to take on a second load of peanuts for Hong Kong, I went to pay my respects to Khoo Ah Lim. His greeting was warm, but I detected a note of embarrassment.

"I am forced to ask of you a favor, Richard," he finally confessed.

"Anything I can do for you, Khoo," I assured him, "will give me nothing but pleasure. Just name it."

"Have you ever heard of Donna Mariquinha dos los Carvalhos?"

The elaborate name seemed familiar, but I could not place it.

"She owns a number of gambling casinos on Macao," Khoo explained. "The property was left to her by her father,

a Portuguese aristocrat who married the daughter of a Chinese mandarin. This makes the Donna Eurasian, of course, but she has much more drive and ambition than most half-castes. She has increased her holdings on Macao and made herself something of a power there."

I was curious. "What has all this to do with me, Khoo?"

"The Donna has sent word that she would like to meet you."

"Whatever for?"

Khoo paused dramatically. "She shares your interest in the *Agni Mani*."

He had all my attention now. "Does she have one of the stones?"

"No, but she has a standing order with almost every gem trader in the East to deliver one to her if one should ever be found. She has one of the most magnificent collections of jewels in the Orient and is eager to acquire an *Agni Mani*. She has offered unbelievable sums for one—as high as a hundred thousand dollars."

In those days this was a sum equal to half a million dollars today. I whistled softly. "I shall be interested indeed in meeting this woman. But what is the favor I can do for you, Khoo?"

"Donna Mariquinha is not a person to make a request. She has ordered one of my best gems—but a condition of the sale is that you bring it to her. Will you do that for me, Richard?"

"Of course!"

It was a simple matter for me to stop off at Macao, a thumb-nail-sized colony, near the delta of the Pearl River, which has been a Portuguese possession for more than 400 years. Centuries ago, before the development of Hong Kong as a port, Macao had been one of the great trading centers of the Far East. Today, its trade all gone, it lives by intrigue, smuggling, and legalized gambling.

I knew the place but casually, having been there only once before. Gus, however, was an old habitu  and offered to be my guide and bodyguard. When the *Yongmin* reached Macao, Gus and I got off and left Chiang to take the ship on to Hong Kong. He was to pick us up on the return trip to Canton.

Macao, for all its sinister reputation, had a curiously pious look. Spearing above the pink and green buildings along the Praya Grande, the town's waterfront, were the spires of eight churches. Yet, in the casinos and hotels all around us

could be heard the clatter of Mah-Jongg counters, the rattle of roulette wheels, the slap and shuffle of cards, and the sharp exclamations of gamblers from every corner of the earth. This was indeed the Monte Carlo of the East.

To get into our hotel, the Macao, Gus and I had to walk around thousands of tiny red firecracker casings spread out on the sidewalk to dry. The manufacture of fireworks was the colony's only reputable industry. Inside the hotel, we had hardly registered before a slender, well-dressed, but oily-looking Eurasian stepped up to me and said, "Baron Skadding, I bring respects from Donna Mariquinha. I am to see that you safely reach her home."

"We'll be ready in a minute," Gus told him.

The Eurasian didn't bother to look at Gus. "I have instructions to bring only you, Baron Skadding."

I was carrying an extremely valuable gem in a secret pocket of my coat. A .32 caliber automatic was in another pocket, but I wasn't taking any chances. "Will you please call a police officer?" I said to the desk clerk.

The Eurasian made no attempt to run. He even gave me a glance of admiration as we waited. When the Portuguese policeman arrived, I indicated the Eurasian and asked, "Do you know this man?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Is he in the employ of Donna Mariquinha?"

"He is indeed, sir. He is one of her chief aides."

I then apologized to the Eurasian. "I'm sorry—I had to make sure of you."

"Of course."

A few minutes later we were in a racy English car, climbing into the green hills of Macao. At the highest elevation, in what was obviously the select area of the colony, we drove through a splendid iron gateway, followed a graveled roadway around parklike lawns and shrubbery, and drew up in front of a Spanish-style mansion. A white-gloved Chinese servant opened the car door on my side.

"Please wait on the terrace," the Eurasian instructed me. "The Donna will be right out."

I walked down the shaded portico to a marble terrace that was surrounded by high-stemmed rose trees. An elaborate silver tea service was spread on a table, and peacock-shaped chairs stood gracefully on each side. I moved over to the balustrade and looked down the steep hillside to which houses

clung miraculously. Beyond, in the strong sunlight, stretched the dazzling blue sea, dotted with sailing boats reduced to the size of apple seeds.

Behind me, a woman's voice said, "Welcome, Baron Skadding."

I turned and, quite literally, stood there speechless, staring at the most exotic woman I had ever seen. She was tall, almost as tall as I, and strongly but attractively built. Every curve of her body, it seemed, was revealed by her sheathlike dress, made of the finest white silk and lace. In spectacular contrast, her skin was the color of honey. This tawny hue was accentuated by her topaz-colored eyes, which were doe-like in shape but almost tigerish in intensity.

There was, in fact, an animalistic quality to the woman. Her nose was short and sensual, like a cat's, and her ears, tipped with blood-red rubies, clung closely to her well-shaped head. Her shiny black hair was drawn back severely from her brow. As she came toward me, she moved with style and authority.

"I am Donna Mariquinha," she said in a husky voice, and I recovered in time to accord her the respect she clearly demanded. I bowed low, murmured, "Charmed," and kissed the hand she had extended.

"Please sit down," she told me.

I did so, and she sat opposite me, her topaz eyes never leaving my face. She gazed at me steadily until the servants had poured tea and departed. Then she said, "You are younger than I expected—and more handsome."

Flattery always makes me uneasy or suspicious, but this was not flattery. It was a direct statement.

I tried to smile. "Did you expect an old man?"

"I expected a man who would show many years of travel. I understood you had long been in search of the *Agni Mani*."

This, obviously, was a woman who believed in coming right to the point. I had lived in the Orient long enough to proceed with caution. "Who gave you such information?"

"Gem traders, mostly. They come here often to sell me jewels. First one spoke of you, then another and another. Finally I determined to see you myself." She paused, and the very intensity of her eyes seemed to throw off sparks. "I, too, am interested in the *Agni Mani*. I must have one!"

The Donna was leaning toward me now, tensely, as though she were about to pounce. I almost shrank back. Yet, per-

versely, the woman fascinated me. She might be mad, but it was an interesting madness.

I sipped my tea and shrugged. "An *Agni Mani* is not easily acquired. I have never even seen one."

"But you know where you can find one!"

"No," I protested, "I don't."

"I have heard differently. I have heard you are close on the trail of an *Agni Mani*!"

"That's not true. I have a number of theories about where I might find one, but that's all."

The Donna glared at me, as though to frighten the truth out of me.

"I'll pay anything!" she declared. "Anything! I'll give you a hundred thousand dollars for an *Agni Mani*—on top of any expenses you may incur. If you have to steal the stone, I'll protect you."

The situation was becoming absurd.

"I am not a thief," I said a little coldly. "If I should ever acquire an *Agni Mani*—and that is extremely unlikely—I shall certainly remember your offer. More than that I cannot promise."

The Donna's eyes were blazing, near hypnotic, with tiny yellow flames. "Will you at least bring me the *Agni Mani* if you should find one? Will you just let me look at it—feel it?"

I could understand this desire. I had expressed it myself years before. This woman and I shared the same fever—yet her obsession was far stronger than mine. It seemed almost to verge on insanity. Curious, I asked, "Why are you so determined to have an *Agni Mani*?"

She looked at me as though I were crazy. "What a question! You know the powers of the stone. It would bring me love, fortune, influence, everything a woman could want!"

I glanced about the palatial residence. "But you have so much already—"

"What I have is nothing!" She spat the words out angrily, bitterly. "I am queen of a few gambling halls in a God-forgotten corner of the world. I was fated for far more than this!"

There was no doubt in my mind now. The woman was mad—power mad. To placate her, I said, "If I should ever acquire an *Agni Mani*, I promise I will bring it to you."

This seemed to satisfy the Donna. I took advantage of the

moment to mention the gem I had brought from Khoo Ah Lim. "Would you like to see it here?" I asked.

Surprisingly, the Donna displayed a coy side of her nature. She smiled slowly, insinuatingly, and said, "No, we will go inside. A gem is like a woman. Neither should be disrobed in the harsh light of day."

Inside, in a darkened room, I uncovered the gem in the soft glow of a table lamp. It was a superb stone and very rare, square cut like an emerald but with the gentle pink of a pale ruby.

"I'll take it," Donna Mariquinha immediately decided. The price of the gem was high, but she wrote out a check as though she were signing a hotel register.

"Now," said the Donna, suddenly and strangely young, like a child about to show her most prized possessions, "you must see my jewels!"

It was indeed a magnificent collection, one of the richest I had ever seen. Precious stones were a passion that the Donna and I shared with equal intensity. We became so preoccupied over the flashing array that the afternoon had passed before we realized it.

"You will be my guest tonight," the Donna then announced, "and all the nights and days you are in Macao." She wasn't asking me—she was telling me.

"I have a friend with me," I demurred.

"A woman?"

"No, a man."

Again the Donna's lips moved in that slow, coy smile. "You prefer a man to me?"

The question was too ridiculous to answer. After calling the Macao Hotel and leaving word for Gus that I was all right, I went with Donna Mariquinha. We drove into town, dined at one of her hotels, then made the rounds of her casinos. She was a queen, all right. Dealers and flunkies bowed to her, and customers made way for us. And, I noticed, two bulky Eurasians were never far away. They were obviously the Donna's bodyguards.

I found the Macao style of betting interesting. The gamblers stood on a circular balcony overlooking the gaming tables. Bets were placed in bamboo baskets, which were lowered and raised between the balcony and tables. The shouts of the gamblers and dealers were almost deafening.

As the night progressed, I felt better and better, probably

because of the potent Lagrima Christi the waiters kept serving me. By midnight I thought Donna Mariquinha was quite the most charming woman I had ever met. I paid her outrageous compliments, and she accepted them, with a sort of purring, feline pleasure, as no more than her due.

When we returned to her home, she led me into a discreetly lighted room decorated in cinnabar and gold. The color blend was barbaric but exciting. I could feel my pulse pounding as the Donna came close to me, her bare shoulders gleaming. That slow smile was on her lips again, and her eyes were mysteriously shadowed as she whispered, "Do you believe in the stars?"

"Implicitly."

"Then this should interest you." She slipped the straps of her low-cut evening gown from her shoulders, baring herself to the waist. I caught my breath. Beneath her breasts was a pattern of moles in the shape of an inverted Big Dipper.

Somewhat foolishly, I blurted, "But where is the Polar Star?"

"Here." She laughed softly and allowed the dress to drop lower. . . .

The next few days went by in a blur. Donna Mariquinha and I went horseback riding and swimming together by day, and at night we dined and danced and talked of jewels and life and love and the *Agni Mani*.

Once, as we lay on a grassy slope overlooking the harbor, the Donna said, "Richard, we are both of noble blood. We both have great ambition, great drive. We love the same things and see life in much the same manner. We could found a dynasty of our own. There wouldn't be anything we couldn't do—even find the *Agni Mani*! And then . . ." Her voice trailed off, overcome by the prospects of power spread before her.

She was speaking of marriage, I knew, and it was a tempting possibility. With the Donna's wealth, my search for the *Agni Mani* would be greatly facilitated. And yet, in my heart, I had a troubling sense of doubt and guilt. There was a matter of honor involved, a matter of making my own way. There was also the problem of Ming Lei. I had never made any promises to Ming—she realized marriage was out of the ques-

tion—but I knew the feeling I had for her was truer and finer than any I had for Donna Mariquinha.

Still, the flesh is weak, and the exotic gambling queen had a magnetism that was irresistible. When Chiang stopped off at Macao to pick up Gus and me for the return trip to Canton, the Donna easily persuaded me to send the *Yongmin* on without me. It was quite true, as she pointed out, that I could later take one of the river steamers to Canton. Gus, for his part, was only too delighted to stay on in Macao. He was having a gay old time in the cabarets.

I now became aware of an almost frightening possessiveness in Donna Mariquinha. She frequently wore yellow because, as she told me, "yellow is for jealousy, and I am jealous. I would kill anyone who tried to take anything from me."

She proved this one night in a casino when a well-dressed Chinese woman glanced at me and smiled. Donna Mariquinha, like a tawny tigress in her yellow sheath dress, leaped at the woman, shrieking, "Turn your eyes from my property!"

The terrified woman was knocked to the floor. The Donna would have stamped her eyes out with the spike heels of her shoes if I had not dragged her away. My first impression of the Donna had been right. She was psychopathic.

While I was trying to figure out how I could graciously get away from her, a telegram arrived from Mah Fong: "*Yongmin* captured by pirates. Return immediately."

I hastily explained the situation to Donna Mariquinha and promised to come back to Macao as soon as I could. Then I rounded up Gus, and we caught the river steamer *Fatshan* for Canton.

CHAPTER III

It was shortly after dawn when the *Fatshan* pulled alongside the wharf at Canton. I had stayed up all night, restlessly pacing the deck and worrying about the *Yongmin*. As soon as the gangway was in place, I hustled Gus down to the dim, misty docks.

A Chinese constable in the gray uniform of the Canton police was peering at the alighting passengers. When he saw me, he saluted and said, "Baron Skadding?"

"Yes."

"Will you come to the station, please, sir? The commandant would like to see you."

"Is it about my ship?"

"I think so, sir."

We followed the policeman across the dock, between two warehouses and out to a lane where a car was parked. It was a high-set sedan, not the smaller English model used by the police.

"This isn't a police car," I said, suddenly suspicious.

I was too late. Another Chinese, this one in civilian dress, had come up behind me. Something hard and menacing prodded me in the back. "Get in the car, please."

The Chinese in the policeman's uniform, widely grinning, was holding the rear door open. I pushed Gus in and climbed in after him. The fake constable then got in and sat on a jump-seat facing us. Held low between his legs was a blunt, heavy Webley revolver, the kind that always made me think of a snarling bulldog.

My own compact automatic was in an inside coat pocket. I wondered if I would get the chance—or have the nerve—to use it. I was never put to the test. The fake policeman reached over, patted my chest, found the pistol, and removed it.

Gus, still half asleep, was just beginning to realize something was wrong. He blinked, sat up, and demanded, "Hey, what's going on here?"

"I think we're being kidnapped," I told him, "and probably by pirates."

The Chinese facing me nodded twice, confirming both of my guesses. He quickly frisked Gus for firearms, found none, and spoke to the other Chinese, who had seated himself behind the wheel. "All right. Go."

We lurched down the lane, cut between a block of warehouses, and swung into a main street. Despite the early hour, the avenue was crowded, and I could smell the familiar breakfast odors of dried fish and frying peanut oil.

It was maddening, with the crowds so close, that I could not cry out for help. I was well enough acquainted with the Chinese character to know that any such outcry would go unheeded. Kidnapping, like piracy, was a recognized pro-

fession, and no ordinary Chinese would dream of interfering with a kidnapper in the performance of his duty. For this reason wealthy or influential Chinese always went about accompanied by bodyguards. I had never thought, however, that I would be considered wealthy or influential enough to be kidnapped.

The same thought must have occurred to Gus. Dazedly he kept muttering, "This is ridiculous. . . ."

The situation soon became even more ridiculous. In the northern part of town we drove into a courtyard and parked. While the driver ran to close the courtyard gate, the fake policeman herded Gus and me into a well-furnished, two-story house. This had obviously been rented for the occasion; otherwise we would not have been brought there without being blindfolded.

As we entered the living room, a slight, bespectacled young Chinese rose, bowed and said in stilted English, "Very sorry for so much trouble. My name Sing Mo. I am representative in Canton for General Ng Lam Po."

I doubted this. General Ng was a warlord who controlled a small area north of Canton. He may have had pirates working for him, but I hardly believed he would risk international repercussions by kidnapping foreigners. Sing Mo, I was sure, was only trying to impress me.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

The young Chinese grinned apologetically, as though reluctant to discuss anything so sordid as business. He was wearing a Western-style suit and was obviously pleased with his ability to speak English. I figured he was a clerk who had somehow become involved with pirates.

"Well," he said, still grinning self-consciously, "the situation is this. We have your ship, Baron Skadding, and we have you."

I had been wondering about this. It would have been entirely possible for one gang of pirates to have captured my ship, then another gang to have nabbed Gus and me. At least I knew now that all my eggs, so to speak, were in one basket. I had to move carefully if I was to keep from smashing any.

"You obviously want ransom," I said to Sing Mo. "How much?"

"Fifteen thousand American dollars."

I gasped. "That's absurd! I don't have anywhere near that amount of money!"

"Mah Fong does. He will advance it to you."

These pirates were certainly well informed. Sing Mo must have read my thoughts, for his grin broadened and he said, "The hawk surveys a chicken before the kill—and we have seen you growing very plump of late, Baron Skadding. If we had not swooped on you, others would have."

Curious, I asked, "If you have my ship, why did you bother to kidnap me?"

"It was no bother. We thought you would be on your ship. Your captain, Chiang—who, incidentally, put up a very good fight but was not backed very enthusiastically by his crew—told us you had remained at Macao. We knew Mah Fong would send you word of the *Yongmin's* capture, and we had only to watch the Canton docks for your arrival. Your ship *and* you make for a richer ransom."

"But not as rich as fifteen thousand dollars," I protested. "I doubt if even Mah Fong can raise that sum."

"Then your friend Khoo Ah Lim will help."

Mention of the old gem trader made me suddenly realize I was carrying a check belonging to him. If the pirates found it on me, they would surely torture Khoo into endorsing it. I had to avoid a search and the best way seemed to be to agree to anything the pirates wanted.

"All right," I told Sing Mo. "What do you want me to do?"

He pushed paper and pen toward me. "Just write to Mah Fong, instructing him to pay the ransom. Tell him you will repay him later."

I did as I was told. Sing Mo then read the note and nodded approval. "We will deliver this to Mah Fong. Meanwhile, you and your friend shall be made comfortable."

This was another old Chinese custom—to give kidnap victims all the comforts of home. Although Gus and I were locked in an upstairs bedroom, we were provided with fine food, excellent *samsu* (rice wine), good cigars, and a stack of English and French magazines. Gus pitched into the food. I was too exhausted to eat, drink, or even worry. I stretched out on the bed and fell asleep.

When I woke up, it was afternoon. Gus was anxiously pacing the floor.

"What if Mah Fong won't pay the ransom?" he asked me.

It was a good question, but I didn't know the answer. I got up and began inspecting the windows. They were covered

with heavy iron grillwork, decoratively designed to keep intruders out. By the same token, the ironwork kept us in.

While I was looking around for other possible means of escape, there was a polite knock at the door. Then the cumbersome lock turned over and Sing Mo came in, followed by the Chinese who had masqueraded as a policeman. The former constable was now wearing felt slippers, black sateen trousers, and a soiled white linen coat with unpolished brass buttons. He could have been a waiter in any cheap restaurant, except that he was still carrying that bulldog-like revolver.

"Mah Fong has replied to your note," Sing Mo told me. "He will pay the ransom but regrets he cannot raise the sum in American dollars until tomorrow. Meanwhile, he has requested permission to send two sing-song girls to keep you entertained and in good spirits. Of course, we have granted this request."

This was another quaint old Chinese custom, fantastic as it may sound. Sing-song girls, the Chinese equivalent of Japanese geisha girls, were frequently provided for the entertainment of wealthy kidnap victims while ransom negotiations were being arranged.

Gus perked up immediately. "Sing-song girls!" he enthused, and rubbed his hands together expectantly. "Hope they're pretty."

He was not disappointed. The two girls, when they arrived, were obviously tops in their profession. Gorgeously dressed in bright silken *samfoos*, they bubbled with a giggling sort of gaiety and were made up in the garish manner of Oriental dolls. One was named Min Nam, the other Lok Ma.

Sing Mo, who brought the girls to the bedroom, was reluctant to leave. He stood in the doorway, grinning, getting a secondhand thrill as Lok Ma squealingly allowed herself to be dragged onto Gus's lap.

Min Nam was carrying a bamboo basket in which rested a number of oranges—a Chinese symbol of good luck—and two bottles of Scotch. As she opened one of the bottles, I could see Sing Mo licking his lips.

"That's fine English whisky," he remarked wistfully. "You don't often see it."

I ignored the hint. I might have to pay this unlikely little pirate ransom, but I was damned if I was going to throw a party for him.

"Have you anything more to tell me?" I coldly asked him.

Sing Mo shook his head. "No. Have a good time." He leered at me, then the girls, and left.

Lok Ma was now rolling around on the bed with Gus, giggling and squealing.

"Does she have to make so much noise?" I asked Min Nam.

The girl nodded and whispered, "Yes. In case Sing Mo is listening, he will not hear my instructions to you from Mah Fong."

I drew her close to me. "What did Mah Fong say?"

"He said to tell you that he will pay the ransom tomorrow if you wish it so. But if you want to risk escape, he has a plan."

"What is it?"

"The gang which captured your ship and kidnapped you is a minor band of pirates. Their leader is a former lieutenant of General Ng, and they operate from the river port of Wuchow, forty miles north of Canton. That is where they have taken your ship. Only two of the pirates are in Canton—Sing Mo and the man who posed as a policeman. They are both downstairs. The other man, the one who brought us here, has gone north to Wuchow to inform the rest of the pirates that the kidnapping has been successful."

I was puzzled. "But we are locked in here. How can we escape?"

Min Nam indicated the second bottle of Scotch. "That whisky is drugged. If Lok Ma and I appear to exhaust you and your friend with"—she smiled delicately—"entertainment, then Sing Mo and his companion might be interested in similar entertainment. We can then serve them the drugged whisky and help you to escape. Does the plan appeal to you?"

"Very much! Let's try it."

For the rest of the afternoon and well into the night, the bedroom echoed with the sounds of our sham carousing—although Gus wasn't always pretending. The girls sang, Gus whooped, and I staggered about the room, bumping into furniture. We drank a little of the good whisky and poured the rest down a drain. About ten o'clock Gus and I sprawled on the bed, apparently unconscious, while the girls sat playing cards.

All was quiet for about three-quarters of an hour. Then I heard the door open. Sing Mo, showing off again, whispered to the girls in classical Mandarin, "Are the white devils dead?"

"They had little life to start with," Min Nam replied scornfully.

Sing Mo laughed. "My friend and I are full of life. Would you care to come downstairs with us?"

"It is better than sitting with dead men." I could hear the two girls get up and go to the door.

"Is there any of that fine English whisky left?" Sing Mo asked.

"Yes," said Min Nam, "I'll bring it."

The door closed, the lock thudded into place, and footsteps faded away into silence.

I opened my eyes. Gus had raised up and was looking at me.

"Stay there," I whispered. "They may come back."

"How long do you think it'll take?" he asked.

"Who knows? Sing Mo is the one interested in whisky. The other fellow may not even touch it."

I felt tense and nervous, anxious to get up and do something, but I forced myself to lie on the bed. It was worse for Gus. After a few minutes he whispered, "Can't I even smoke a cigarette?"

"No! Shut up and listen!"

The walls were thick, and there were no sounds from downstairs. Finally, after no more than half an hour had gone by, I heard the heavy lock slam loose in the door. I kept my eyes shut and lay still, holding my breath. Who would it be—the pirates or the girls?

Min Nam answered the question. "*Ho-la*," she called, suppressing her giggly mirth, "all is well! Come quickly!"

I was surprised. I sat up and said, "So soon? Are you sure both men are unconscious?"

"Very sure. That drug works hard and fast. Come quickly!"

Gus and I didn't need to be told again. We pulled on our coats and followed Min Nam downstairs. Sing Mo and his friend lay crumpled on the floor. We didn't pause to inspect them. Lok Ma had the front door open, and we all hurried out, crossed the dark courtyard, opened the gate, and quickly walked down the narrow, deserted street. I never knew fresh air could feel so good.

At the corner Min Nam said, "We will leave you here. Mah Fong said you are to go to your apartment on Shameen Island. You will be safe there, and you can telephone to Mah Fong at his home. He will be waiting for your call."

I felt worried about the girls. "But what about you? The pirates may try to get even with you. Sing-song girls are not hard to find."

Min Nam chuckled. "They are when you have to go to Shanghai to find them. That is where we're from, and that is where we're returning. We came to Canton with two traveling businessmen. They have gone on to Hong Kong, and we are returning home. Mah Fong asked us to do this favor for him. He is an old friend, and we were pleased to oblige."

"But you have been of great service," I said. "I must pay you."

"Mah Fong has already paid us well." Min Nam hailed a passing rickshaw. "Now go! It is not wise to stand about in the streets."

She was right. Gus and I said farewell to the girls, climbed into the rickshaw, and headed for Shameen Island.

At the bridge leading to Shameen, more trouble was waiting for us. An expensive sedan was pulled up near the sentry post, and a Chinese was arguing with the French marines on guard. When one of the marines came over to check the credentials of Gus and myself, I said, "What's the difficulty?"

The marine recognized me and saluted. "Oh, it's you, Baron Skadding. I'm glad you arrived." He indicated a bulky outline inside the expensive sedan. "This man claims his wife is at your apartment."

I took a closer look into the sedan. In the back seat, scowling darkly, sat Tan Kai Yu, Nadya Nadarova's husband. I almost groaned.

The marine went on, "We cannot allow any Chinese on the island after dark, of course, but he and his aide have been most insistent. I would appreciate it if you would speak to them, sir."

I glanced at Gus. He shrugged.

"You and your women!" I muttered. "Come on, let's settle this thing once and for all."

We went over to the sedan and I spoke through the open rear window. "Mr. Tan, you must be mistaken about your wife. Gus and I have been in Macao and are just arriving home. Your wife could not possibly be at our apartment."

In the darkness Tan just glared at me. His aide, the Chinese who had been arguing with the guards, came over and did

the talking. "Mr. Tan's wife most certainly is at your apartment. She was followed there today."

"If I could get you onto the island," I said, "I would prove you are wrong. Unfortunately, I cannot take you to the apartment at this time of night."

"You can take this man," said the aide, pointing to the French marine. "Let him inspect the apartment. If Mr. Tan's wife is there, he can bring her back to her husband."

I glanced at the marine. "Can you do that?"

"If you wish me to, sir."

"All right," I said, "come on."

I was hoping Nadya wouldn't be at the apartment, but she was. As soon as we opened the door, she started throwing things at Gus and swearing in half a dozen different languages. She was so drunk she reeled about the room, crashing into tables and knocking some of my most prized art possessions to the floor. Our *amah* stood in the background, wringing her hands in distress.

"Nadya!" I ordered. "Stop this nonsense!"

It was like talking to a storm. The tempestuous Russian flung a glass at Gus and shrieked, "Dirty dog! Filthy goat! Desert me for a French bitch, will you!"

She had obviously heard about Gus's stripteaser.

"That's enough, Nadya!" I shouted. "Listen to me!"

"Go to hell!" She let fly with a whisky bottle. It was aimed at Gus, but since Nadya was staggering when she threw it, the bottle came straight at me. It bounced off my shoulder and shattered against the wall, showering me with glass and liquor.

This was too much. I had had more than enough of Nadya Nadarova.

"All right," I told the marine, "get her out of here! Take her back to her husband!"

It wasn't easily done, but the Frenchman finally dragged Nadya out of the apartment. We could hear her cries and curses diminishing down the hallway and out into the streets. Other tenants were opening doors and congregating in the corridors, indignantly inquiring about what was going on.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," I said to Gus.

He grinned sheepishly. "Aw, now, Richard, love is one of the wilder emotions. We must expect an occasional disturbance."

I was in no mood to argue with him. Wearily I said, "Go to bed. We've got a lot of work to do tomorrow."

"Sure, Richard." Gus went into his bedroom.

I put a call through to Mah Fong. He answered the phone immediately. "Richard, you are all right?"

"Yes, thanks to you, Mah Fong. I am forever in your debt."

"Not at all, Richard. There is a proverb I enjoy disproving."

"Which one is that?"

"The one that says people help to prop up what is upright but stamp on what is down."

I had to smile. "I'm upright again all right, Mah Fong, but what about the *Yongmin*?"

"We will need fresh minds to discuss that, and morning is the freshest part of the day. I shall come to your apartment shortly after dawn, just as soon as the light of day and my credentials will permit me to pass over to Shameen. Meanwhile, do not leave the apartment, and keep the doors bolted. Will you do that, Richard?"

"Of course."

"Good. Now get some sleep."

This was easier said than done. For hours in the darkness I tossed and turned, wondering how I was going to get my ship back from the pirates.

Gus had no such worries. I could hear him in the next room, soundly snoring.

True to his word, Mah Fong arrived at the apartment shortly after dawn. Khoo Ah Lim was with him. Both of the old gentlemen held their hands close to their waists and bowed to me. I returned the formal Chinese salutation in the same manner. This symbolized our close relationship and had greater meaning than a Western-style handshake.

"I am so pleased to see you well, Richard," murmured Khoo. "We were worried about you."

I smiled and handed him his check from Donna Mariquinha. "I was worried about this. The pirates might have found it on me."

"You should have torn it up."

"There was no time," I explained, "and, besides, I always try to fulfill a trust."

"That is a quality we have learned to admire in you, Richard."

We all sat down, and the *amah* served us breakfast. Afterward Khoo took out a golden toothpick and thoughtfully prodded his teeth, politely concealing the operation with his cupped left hand. Mah Fong meditatively scratched his cheek with his longest fingernail, which extended about two inches from the little finger of his right hand. I contemplated the royal ring on my left hand. We were all thinking, trying to devise some plan to free the *Yongmin*.

I was the first to speak. "Would it do any good to ask the police to help?"

"There is a cargo of contraband salt aboard your ship," Mah Fong gently reminded me. "If the police should find it, you would pay more dearly to them than you would to the pirates."

He was right. We lapsed into silence again.

"I understand," I finally said, "that the leader of the pirates who captured my ship is a former lieutenant of the warlord, General Ng."

Mah Fong nodded. "Yes, he is a Korean named Kago—a big man but rotting with some disease. He is desperately playing out the last few years of his life and has gathered about himself a small band of similar desperadoes."

"Kago . . ." I mused. "I don't think I have ever met him."

"It would be unlikely," said Ma Fong. "Kago and his gang usually operate north of Canton. It was probably Sing Mo who put them on to you, Richard. He once worked for a shipping company here and had ample opportunity to observe you."

Mention of Sing Mo made me smile. "I wonder if he and his friend have awakened yet."

"If they have," Mah Fong said dryly, "they are undoubtedly putting as much distance as they can between themselves and Kago. He would kill both of them if he knew they had allowed you to get away."

"Then you don't think Kago knows I have escaped?"

"It would be extremely unlikely."

I had been gazing at the formidable gray outline of a British warship, which was docked across the river. A plan—a wild and dangerous plan—was slowly taking shape in my mind.

"If I had British nationality," I said, half to myself, "I could appeal to the officers of that battleship. They would only

be too glad to send a launch upriver and demand the release of a British subject's ship."

Khoo nodded. "That is true, Richard."

"And yet," I went on, becoming more and more intrigued by my own plan, "it's so simple to look like an officer—just put on a uniform, strap a naval pistol around your waist, arrive in a launch with a flag flying, and act with authority. Gus and I could do that. We could board the *Yongmin* and demand her release in the name of the British crown!"

Khoo and Mah Fong gazed at me. They might have thought I had gone crazy, but their impassive faces didn't show it. They were at least giving my plan careful consideration, weighing the pros and cons.

"You and Gus would look authoritative and impressive in uniform," Mah Fong finally decided, "and I think Kago could easily be bluffed, particularly if you arrived shortly after dawn. He and his men spend the nights drinking and gambling ashore. If you confronted them in the pale hours of dawn, they might not have the moral strength to resist you."

"But how would Richard and Gus sail the *Yongmin* back to Canton?" asked Khoo.

"Chiang and the rest of the crew are imprisoned below deck. Once released, they could quickly get the *Yongmin* away from Wuchow."

I was all steamed up about the idea now. "Then you think the plan would work?"

Khoo and Mah Fong looked at each other. Mah Fong nodded, and Khoo gave his opinion first. "It is a good plan but one that rests on a number of delicate balances. For your own safety, Richard, I would prefer to advance you whatever money you need to buy your ship back from the pirates."

I shook my head. "I am grateful indeed for your generous offer, Khoo, but I have no intention of going any deeper into debt. I am anxious to pay Mah Fong what I owe him and be free to continue my quest for the *Agni Mani*. You can understand my feelings in this matter, I'm sure."

Khoo nodded.

Mah Fong then gave his opinion. "Your plan is sound, Richard. I shall help you to obtain whatever equipment and aid you need to carry it out."

At that moment, Gus wandered out of his bedroom. He yawned, blinked at me, and said, "You look excited, Richard. What's happened?"

"We've just joined the British navy!"

By the time I'd finished explaining my plan to free the *Yongmin*, Gus was as enthusiastic about it as I was.

"We'll need a couple of ordinary sailors," he said. "I know just the fellows."

These turned out to be a pair of Dutch adventurers who were game for anything that would pay them well. They readily agreed to accompany Gus and me on our dangerous masquerade.

Meanwhile, Mah Fong had made arrangements with a Chinese tailor to put all his assistants to work on uniforms for two British naval officers and two ordinary sailors. The tailoring establishment was in a narrow, cobblestoned lane lined with open-fronted shops. At the curb stood a mobile café loaded with trays of roasted orange-colored ducks. Above them hung dried shark fins, seaweeds, and smoked rats. Flies buzzed around bowls filled with black jelly, ivory-colored bean cakes, and roasted water beetles. As I waited with the others to be measured by the tailor, I wondered again—for perhaps the thousandth time—how the people of the Orient managed to escape poisoning themselves with the things they ate.

The tailor, who specialized in naval uniforms, finished taking our measurements and told me, "The uniforms will be ready in only a few hours. If you and the other gentlemen would care to wait upstairs, I would be pleased to provide refreshments and sing-song girls."

This was a proposal that appealed mightily to Gus and the two Dutchmen, but I quickly vetoed it. "No, thanks. We will return later for the uniforms. We have important work to do now."

I hustled my companions to a Chinese boat yard on the waterfront, where Mah Fong was waiting for us.

"Will that craft do?" he asked me, pointing to a white power launch. It had a roofed cabin and was almost identical with launches carried by British warships.

"It's fine," I said, "except that the color is wrong. It'll have to be painted gray."

"That can easily be done." Mah Fong called the owner of the boat yard and arranged to have the launch painted gray, at least to the waterline, with the inscription *H.M.S. Helena*—the name of the British warship—marked on the bow.

Terms for the rental of the launch were agreed upon, and the boat yard owner promised to have it ready by nightfall.

Mah Fong and I then split up our party and departed on separate missions. I borrowed a British Union Jack from a friendly hotel owner, while Mah Fong acquired four naval-style pistols and picked up the completed uniforms. We all met back at my apartment.

In uniform, Gus and I and the two Dutchmen would have brought pride to the eye of the British First Lord of the Admiralty. Gus, impressed by his own appearance, practiced saluting in front of a mirror. The plump Dutchmen, except for the fact that they spoke practically no English, could easily have passed for a couple of jolly Jack Tars.

"Just keep your mouths shut when we reach the *Yongmin*," I cautioned them. No one, not even a Chinese, could mistake their tongue for the King's English.

Mah Fong brought up another point. "Kago might demand to see your orders—although he can't read a word of English. Have you anything that could pass for an official British document?"

I rummaged through my papers and finally came up with a written guarantee for a watch I had bought from a British shop in Hong Kong. Since the shop was a branch of a London firm patronized by the King and Queen, it was permitted to use the royal crest. In color, this covered the top of the guarantee. Beneath it, typewritten in green on slick art paper, was a detailed description of the watch I had purchased. Under this was a seal, a stamp, and the flourishing signature of the manager of the shop. It was all most impressive.

Mah Fong also noticed a photo of myself standing beside General Wu Ting Fang, the governor of Canton. It had been taken shortly after I had arrived in town with a letter of introduction to the governor.

"Carry this picture with you," Mah Fong advised me. "It will convince Kago that you are a man of importance—not only a British officer but a friend of General Wu."

By nightfall, we were ready to go. Dressed in our uniforms, our heavy automatics strapped to our waists in the white service webbing of the British navy, our borrowed Union Jack proudly fluttering from the stern of our rented launch, we chugged out of the boat yard and headed upstream. In the darkness sampans slipped past us on the strong current,

their dim lanterns swiftly appearing and disappearing. I was at the helm and had to keep careful watch until we had moved north of the heavy traffic of Canton.

One of the Dutchmen was the only other member of our party with navigational experience, and he spelled me at the wheel through the night while the others rested. Under the pale stars, on the mysterious black river, my thoughts turned inevitably to Ming Lei. I remembered the nights we had spent in the silken cabin of her sampan, and I wondered whether she was thinking of me. . . .

At dawn, through the mist rising from the river, the dark outlines of junks and barges drifted past us. A few minutes later I could see the curved gables of Wuchow. I alerted the others, and we all kept close watch as we slowly made our way through the forest of masts along the waterfront. There was no sign of the *Yongmin*.

"Perhaps the pirates have moved her," said Gus.

I refrained from snapping at him. My nerves were on edge. There were many "perhapses" in this adventure—or misadventure—and any one could lead to sudden death.

"Just keep your eyes open," I told Gus. "Never mind the gab."

Gus muttered something but otherwise obeyed my order. About ten minutes later he exclaimed, "There she is, Richard! There's the *Yongmin*!"

I scrambled over to Gus's side of the launch. He was pointing to a white ship anchored upstream. It was indeed the *Yongmin*. I quickly gave directions to the Dutchman at the helm, and we slowly approached the *Yongmin* from the stern.

My edgy anxiety had passed now. I felt tense and excited but ready for anything. The others, when I glanced at them, reflected my own eager anticipation. Gus was briskly polishing his glasses.

"All right," I said, "here's the only instructions I can give you. Leave your pistols in their holsters but unbutton the flaps. If anything goes wrong, grab your guns, start shooting, and try to release Chiang and the crew. If it comes to a fight with the pirates, our only hope is to free the crew quickly enough to help us." I indicated the Dutchman at the helm. "You stay with the launch and keep the engine running. The rest of us will board the *Yongmin*."

We were alongside the gangway now. I stepped onto the swaying ladder and looked up. Two rumpled-looking Chinese

were leaning over the railing, staring down at me. One was dressed in an old green uniform, obviously a castoff from the army of General Ng.

This was the first of the "delicate balances" I had to get over if my plan was to work. If Kago had not yet returned from his night of carousing ashore, the leaderless pirate rabble might panic and start firing at us.

"Is your captain aboard?" I called in Cantonese to the pirates at the rail.

They looked at each other, both bleary-eyed and uncertain. The uniformed one finally replied, "Yes, but he is asleep."

"Wake him," I ordered, going up the gangway. "Tell him a British naval officer is here to see him."

I could hear Gus and the Dutchman clanking up the iron steps behind me. The two pirates at the rail didn't move. They just stood there, sullenly staring down at me. Two others, just as bleary-eyed and surly, came over and joined them.

The only way to make a sullen Chinese hurry, I had learned, is to yell at him. When I reached the deck, I roared, "Do as I tell you! Get your captain down here at once!"

Almost by conditioned reflex, one of the Chinese jumped to obey. He hurried off toward the bridge. The others drew back from me, still surly but now obviously intimidated by the authority of my uniform, voice, manner, and pistol—as well as those of the two men standing solidly behind me.

I looked much more forceful than I felt. Nervous sweat had formed in my armpits and was sliding down my sides. I had hoped there would be only a few pirates up and about. There were at least a score. Some appeared to have just risen from crude beds spread on deck. Others wandered out of the cabins, rubbing their eyes and blinking at us. Several, I noticed with a sinking feeling, carried rifles and had cartridge bandoliers slung across their chests.

Incongruously, a number of women were frying fish and boiling rice over a brazier in the bow of the ship, where washing hung on a line. A cluster of children, some with infants clutched on their hips, helped with the chores. Other kids ran about, playing.

As always, I was fascinated by the Chinese children. No matter how dirty or ragged they might be, their faces always looked like flowers. When one ran up to me and grabbed my trouser leg, laughing, as though to pull me into his game, I could not help smiling at him.

Someone guffawed. I looked up. Several of the pirates were grinning, amused because the child had not been frightened by my show of authority. A display of softness is fatal in dealing with militant Chinese. I sternly frowned and motioned the child away. The pirates' smiles faded, and some averted their eyes as I slowly surveyed them.

Again, I appeared far more in command of the situation than I felt. This was another "delicate balance" I had to get over. There was one pirate who could spot and expose me—the man who had driven the kidnap car from the docks to Sing Mo's hideout, then had gone on to Wuchow to report the success of the kidnapping. Uneasily, I looked from pirate to pirate, half expecting one to rise up and accuse me.

There was no such move, and my attention was finally diverted by a fat, sleepy Korean coming down from the bridge. He was wearing black sateen pajamas that contrasted strikingly with the pallor of his face. Dark pouches of dissipation hung beneath his lackluster eyes, and his temples bore red oblong marks caused by pinching the skin to cure headaches. He was a sick man. As he approached, rubbing one hand through his bristly hair, he stared at me in a mingle of curiosity and resentment.

"Are you Kago?" I demanded in Cantonese.

He nodded. His voice, when he spoke, was almost whispery. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I am an officer of the British warship *Helena*, and I am here to demand the release of this ship. It is the property of a British subject and was illegally seized."

Kago slowly looked over my uniform, then murmured, "I have only your word for what you say."

I motioned to Gus, who opened an official-looking briefcase he was carrying and whipped out the guarantee from the Hong Kong jewelry shop. I handed it to Kago. "There are my orders."

The pirate chief gazed dully at the guarantee, slowly taking in the royal crest and seal. Then he frowned, glanced down the gangway at the launch, and blinked at the Union Jack fluttering in the morning breeze.

Puzzled, he turned again to me. "But the *Helena* is docked at Canton."

"No," I corrected him, "it is only a short distance below Wuchow. If you do not turn over this ship to me immediately, the *Helena* will take it by the force of its big guns."

Kago didn't know whether to believe me or not. "Then why is the warship not here with you now?"

"Because, if possible, we wish to avoid an international incident. I do this out of consideration for General Wu, the governor of Canton, who is a close friend of mine." Again I motioned to Gus, who handed over the photo of General Wu and myself. Kago peered at it, still in doubt.

"You wear no uniform here," he said, pointing to the picture.

"It was taken on a social occasion," I explained. "I display the picture only to help you avoid making a grievous mistake. You well know the power of General Wu."

Kago frowned and rubbed his temples. "I, too, have a friend of great power—General Ng. This ship is carrying contraband, and I seized it in his name."

"What you say may or may not be true," I said. "If it is not true, you and your men will suffer the wrath of General Ng for bringing a foreign warship to this area. If it is true, then perhaps I should take up the matter directly with General Ng." I glanced at my wristwatch. "In any event, the *Helena* will be here at any minute. I have no desire to remain aboard this vessel while a warship is firing at it."

"No, wait!" Kago was furiously massaging his temples now. He was a sick and harassed man, in no condition to fight or even make a decision. His men made it for him. Some, who had closely followed the conversation, had already bundled their belongings together, and were hastily preparing to leave the *Yongmin*. Others called to their women, who quickly began taking down the washing and salvaging what they could of the half-cooked breakfast. Someone piped a signal on the ship's steam whistle, and sampans began coming out from shore. The pirates shoved and pushed each other in their hurry to get down the gangway.

I could hardly conceal my elation. Kago, on the other hand, gave clear evidence of his defeat. Glumly, he slumped against the rail and murmured, "It will not be necessary for you to mention this matter to General Ng. I am leaving." Weakly, he called to a scurrying pirate, "Get my coat."

The pirate snarled back the Cantonese equivalent of "Get it yourself!" Kago was finished in more ways than one. He had to get his own belongings and totter down the gangway, the last of the pirates to leave.

By then Gus and I had released the crew from their prison below decks. The launch was lifted aboard, and the *Yongmin* was soon steaming downstream. Except for the litter the pirates had left, the ship was in good condition. Amazingly, only one hold had been looted of cargo. The other two were still piled high with rice and salt.

Checking the cabins, Gus and I found two pirates who had been left behind. They were both in a drunken stupor. One, I was pleased to see, was my old friend, the driver of the kidnap car. I am not a vicious or vindictive man, and I made sure this particular pirate could swim before I personally threw him overboard.

We regulated our speed so as to reach Canton after night-fall, then docked at a private wharf belonging to Mah Fong's agency. Mah Fong himself was waiting for us. I had never seen him grin so broadly.

"The gods were with you, Richard," he told me, "but do not expect them to remain forever at your side. I think it would be wise for you to leave Canton for a while."

I smiled. "I think so, too."

"Good. I will have my coolies work throughout the night, removing your cargo. You can leave for Hong Kong in the morning."

I was surprised. "So soon? And without cargo?"

"Do you not value your life more than cargo? In making a fool of one pirate leader, you have made a fool of all pirate leaders—and they have a strong brotherhood. Their very honor will demand revenge."

"Possibly," I admitted, "but surely not by tomorrow morning."

"By morning," said Mah Fong, indicating the two Dutchmen, who had been paid off and were setting out for a big night in the cabarets, "all Canton will know what you have done."

He was right. I smiled and said, "I should never argue with you, Mah Fong. Gus and I will leave in the morning."

"Good. I will join you in Hong Kong in a few days, and we can map out new trading ventures for the *Yongmin*."

As Gus and I were leaving the wharf, a slender figure came out of the shadows. It was Ming Lei's *mui tsai*.

"Missy sent me to wait and see if you arrived back all right," she explained.

"Tell her I am all right," I said, "and ask her to meet me in the usual place in three hours."

The *mui tsai* bowed and hurried away. Gus and I hailed a rickshaw and headed for Shameen. We were still wearing our British navy uniforms, and this confused the French sentries at the bridge.

"We've been to a masquerade party," I said, not entirely untruthfully.

At our apartment building someone was sitting in the darkness of the terrace. It was a woman. She stood up when she saw Gus and me coming up the lighted walk.

"Richard . . ." she called, and her voice was almost a moan. "Gus . . ."

It was Nadya Nadarova. Annoyed, I said, "Nadya, if you've come here to make more trouble—"

She started to slump to the ground, and I caught her just in time. Gus hurried up behind me. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know. She's fainted."

Nadya stirred and drew back out of my arms. "No . . . I'm all right. I'm here on business, Richard. I have some jewels to sell."

I looked at her closely. Both of her hands were wrapped in what looked like towels.

"Nadya," I demanded, "what's this all about? What's happened to your hands?"

She seemed to be in a state of shock. "My hands. . . ?" Dazedly she looked down at the awkward bandages.

There was no use talking to her. I took one of her hands, unwrapped its loose covering, then caught my breath. Behind me, Gus exclaimed, "Oh, my God." Every one of Nadya's fingernails had been pulled out. Her fingertips looked black with dried blood.

"Get a doctor!" I told Gus.

He hurried away, and I helped Nadya into our apartment. I stretched her out on a sofa and sent the *amah* hustling for hot water and antiseptic.

"In here. . . ." Nadya said, weakly trying to hold up her covered hand. I unwrapped it, and a glittering little shower of jewels fell out. "Buy them from me, Richard. I need the money to escape. . . ."

"Don't try to talk," I said. "Just take it easy."

But Nadya felt compelled to speak. "It was my husband.

He intends to torture me to death. This is only the beginning. . . ."

With a deep sense of shame and regret, I remembered it was I who had turned her over to her husband. "Nadya, I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, Richard—only my own. Just help me to escape."

"Of course. How did you get away from your husband?"

"He left the house tonight, and I bribed one of the servants to unlock my room. I gave her half my jewels, then took the rest to sell. I need money to get to Hong Kong. I'll be safe there."

Gus and the doctor arrived then. The doctor, a Frenchman, immediately went to work on Nadya's hands. He was coolly detached from his work and kept murmuring, "Interesting . . . very interesting."

Gus, on the other hand, had worked himself into a rage. He wanted to find Nadya's husband and shoot him down.

"Don't be a fool," I told him. "Tan Kai Yu is surrounded by bodyguards, and the law is all on his side. Nadya is stateless. Her marriage places her under Chinese law, which means her husband can do just about as he pleases with her. It's his traditional right to torture her to death for infidelity."

"Barbarians!" Gus muttered. "I hate the Chinese!"

"They didn't ask you to live in their country," I reminded him, "and they certainly didn't give you any license to make love to another man's wife—even the white wife of a Chinese. You have contributed as much as anyone else to this whole damned mess, Gus, and Nadya herself is certainly not without blame."

That calmed him down. "But we must help her, Richard."

"Of course. We'll take her to Hong Kong with us."

As soon as Nadya's hands were bandaged, Gus took her to spend the rest of the night aboard the *Yongmin*. I paid off the doctor and, without quite knowing what I was doing, began to pack my most prized possessions. I had made enemies with the pirates and one of the most powerful men in South China, Nadya's husband, and I had a feeling I would not be returning to Canton.

Ming Lei sensed this feeling. As we lay in the cabin of her sampan later that night, floating on the dark river, she murmured, "A wall grows between us, Richard. . . ."

Almost angrily, I tried to deny my own feeling. "No! I'll come back to you, Ming! We'll be together again!"

Sadly she touched one finger to my lips and smiled. "To speak such words is like writing on water. . . ."

Her wisdom was deeper than mine, her acceptance of fate calmer. An unutterable sense of loss and futility swept over me, and I leaned my head against Ming's shoulder. I could have wept with sorrow. I had never before realized the terrible truth of the old French saying: With each good-bye, one dies a little. . . .

Gently Ming stroked my brow and whispered, "We follow the river, Richard. When it goes straight, we go straight. When it bends, we turn with it, and often we cannot look back. We can no longer see what we have left. Yet sometimes, when the desire is deep enough, we can leave part of our hearts—and then a miracle of love occurs." She took my hand and placed it over her heart. "I will never see you again, Richard, but you will remain always in here. You will live forever, yet never grow old. . . ."

Her love and wisdom soothed me, gave me strength. Just before dawn we returned to Shameen and said our last farewell. A few hours later, in the misty light of morning, I stood on the bridge of the *Yongmin*, watching Canton falling away behind me.

CHAPTER IV

The weather was rough when we arrived at Hong Kong, and we anchored off Aberdeen, away from the main harbor traffic of the British colony. Nadya had no passport, and I knew we might have trouble getting her ashore. If we lay off the island until dark, I figured, we would not be likely to attract any immigration officials. We could then hail a sampan and land Nadya at some quiet beach or dock.

While waiting for night to fall, I stood on deck, looking up at the majestic Peak of Hong Kong. The clouds were low, lingering close to the highest elevation. Colorful villas clung to the hillside, and a funicular train wormed its way up the lush green slope. In the early darkness lights began to blink

on. Soon the whole island was flickering and flashing, an illuminated section of fairyland.

About eight o'clock Gus signaled for a sampan, and we took Nadya ashore. She had come out of her shock now and was feeling much better.

"I have friends in Hong Kong," she told me. "They are French and will help me to get travel papers to go to Paris. I am sick of the Orient."

She still had her jewels. I had given her the address of a reputable British dealer who would pay her the best price for them.

In a waterfront café Nadya telephoned her friends, and they came and picked her up in a car. I felt relieved to have her off my hands. I was also anxious to get back to my ship. The wind had a sullen menace that made me uneasy.

Back on the *Yongmin*, I climbed to the bridge and joined Chiang. He was staring into the threatening darkness.

"Typhoon?" I said.

The big Chinese shrugged. "Maybe."

"We'd better get on a safer side of the island," I suggested.

"Yes, but not now. Too dark. Better in morning." Chiang took out his pipe. "We need fuel oil, too. Tanks almost empty."

In the morning, bucking the heavy winds, we moved the *Yongmin* around to the Standard Oil wharf opposite Stonecutter's Island. As coolies scurried to fasten the oil hose to our tanks, I stood in a sheltered corner of the lower deck and looked out over the harbor. Ships, boats, junks, and barges were straining to escape the gathering storm. The wind had risen to an angry howl now, and I could see a ferryboat from Kowloon drunkenly lurching in the choppy waves. The gale plucked smoke from the funnels of a passing liner like feathers from a white chicken. Under the impact of the wind, our own rigging struggled to shake itself loose.

Someone called to me, and I looked around. Gus was inching his way down the deck, holding to the rail for support. He was wearing oilskins, and the wind lashed the coat about his legs.

"The red flag is up!" Gus shouted, pointing toward the Kowloon ferry station. This meant that a typhoon was approaching.

Gus yelled something else, but I couldn't hear him. The rain struck just then and drowned out his voice. The thick,

heavy raindrops hit like machine-gun fire, drumming on the ship and shattering the whole world.

There was no escaping the slanting dark deluge. Soaked to the skin, half-blinded, slipping and sliding, I fought my way across the deck to Gus. He was still holding tightly to the rail, but he managed to grin at me.

"This is it!" he shouted, and the storm snatched the words from his lips. "Typhoon!"

"Let's get up on the bridge!" I shouted back.

Clutching each other, we staggered to the iron ladder and climbed to the bridge. Chiang was shouting orders right and left as crewmen scrambled to secure the ship to the wharf, fasten down lifeboats and derricks, and get out of the way of flying debris. Both anchors had already been dropped.

"Look!" Gus laughed, pointing across the channel to Kowloon. Through a break in the storm, we could see a black flag going up over the ferry station, signifying that the typhoon had struck. Everybody already knew this, but some punctilious British civil servant had to make it official. Even as we watched, the flag was ripped away and the entire roof of the ferry station took off like a great dark bird.

Frantic screams from the wharf diverted our attention. We stumbled to the rail and looked down. The oil hose had broken loose from our tank connection and was whipping about like some huge, enraged snake, spewing oil all over the wharf, our ship, and the turbulent water around us. Two coolies were desperately clinging to the hose, caught between two furies. If they let go, the typhoon would blow them away.

Chiang blasted out a signal on our steam whistle, and the engineers at the pumping station finally saw what had happened. They turned off the flow of oil, but not before the water around the *Yongmin* was covered with a slick black film. This in the end was what saved us, for the oil calmed the stormy waves at least a little and prevented them from battering the ship to pieces against the wharf.

Nevertheless, it was a near thing. Gigantic breakers crashed over the wharf, threatening to tear the *Yongmin* from her moorings and hurl her to destruction. Spray and rain were so thick that, more often than not, we seemed to be under water. Sheets of corrugated iron rose from sheds and sailed through the air like newspapers. At one time I saw a whole row of telephone poles laid flat by a mighty sweep of the wind. The loose wires fluttered wildly, throwing off

showers of vicious sparks. It was an awesome demonstration of the superiority of nature's powers over those of man.

There were other such displays, each more terrifying than the preceding. A small steamer, about the same size as the *Yongmin*, was slammed against the rocks of Stonecutter's Island. It broke up like a matchbox and disappeared in the raging sea.

Nearby, two capsized sampans rose and fell on the rain-spattered waves. A number of men and women clung to the boats, frantically waving. There was nothing anyone could do for them. One by one, they were wrenched loose by the wind or waves and swallowed by the sea.

The deadly drama continued. Through the curtain of driving rain, a large steamer drifted into view. She was listing heavily, broadside to the wind. Her bow was under water, and the stern stood high, exposing the rudder and propeller. Men clung to the rigging.

Beside me, I heard Gus groan, "Oh, dear God, help them!"

I murmured a similar prayer—in vain. The steamer's stern rose higher and higher, then slid out of sight into the waves. Some of the men were swept from the rigging. Others went under with the ship.

Gus groaned again and I glanced at him. The rain looked like tears on his cheeks, and his face was white. I caught him just as he bent over and vomited.

"Let's get ashore," he moaned. "Let's make a run for it."

I had been thinking the same thing. Yet on shore not a soul was visible. Tin sheds had been flattened like cards, and even a brick wall lay crumbled. The typhoon was rolling heavy oil drums along the wharf. A man would have been blown away like a matchstick.

"We'll stay right here," I told Gus. "Our best chance is to stay with the ship."

My decision was immediately challenged by the storm. A freak roller broke beneath the wharf and shot geysers of oily water up through gaps in the planking. The *Yongmin* caught the brunt of the roller and was lifted high, snapping some of the moorings and straining the others. There was a long, terrifying moment of suspense, then the full weight of the ship came down against the wharf. The splintering crash sent us all sprawling.

Stunned, I managed to crawl to the side railing of the bridge, where the wind inflated my coat and pants like bal-

loons. Chiang was lying on his back, his eyes wide, looking up like a man who could not believe what he saw. I followed his gaze, just in time to see our smokestack break loose. The big funnel floated over our heads, almost lazily, like something seen in a dream. A moment later it was followed, much faster, by one of our lifeboats.

It seemed impossible for anything or anyone to survive such violence. Wind and waves competed in shows of strength. At one time I saw a wooden ship pulverized by the pounding seas. Then the shrieking gale lifted the dark mass of debris and hurled it against a breakwater, flinging foam, splinters, and men high in the air.

Sick in body and spirit, I closed my eyes and held to an iron stanchion. I lost all sense of time. It may have been minutes or hours later when I opened my brine-caked eyes and saw the typhoon had abated. The gray rain was still falling, but softer now, with a kind of melancholy tiredness. Ashore, I could see figures cautiously emerging from scenes of destruction and desolation. It was typical of the Chinese, conditioned to disaster, that they immediately set to work, clearing away debris and rebuilding.

Still, for days afterward, the typhoon left grim reminders of its might. The wreckage of hundreds of sampans and junks floated everywhere, intermingled with the drifting corpses of humans and animals. Six large liners lay beached like helpless whales. Protruding masts and funnels marked the watery graves of nine coastal steamers.

Downtown Hong Kong was a shambles. The streets, especially the steep side lanes, were cluttered with masonry, glass, and signboards. Some of the Chinese, with that curious ambiguity of their race, laughed and chattered even while hauling dead bodies out of the debris.

I later learned that during the height of the typhoon the wind had reached a velocity of 129 miles an hour. The storm, which cut a wide swath through Southeast Asia, killed more than 12,000 people.

The *Yongmin* was badly battered. Aside from the smokestack and lifeboat, we had lost some of the copper sheets from the bottom, and a hole had been punched near the engine room. Chiang estimated it would take at least three weeks to make the necessary repairs.

The cost worried me. I had little cash and practically no

credit. Fortunately, Mah Fong arrived in Hong Kong about a week after the typhoon and advanced me funds to make the *Yongmin* seaworthy again.

While the repairs were being made, Gus and I moved into the Gloucester Hotel. In the lounge one day I was surprised to see Nadya Nadarova, drinking a highball and having a high old time with a couple of American naval officers. I tried to walk past her, but she saw me and came running after me.

"Richard, don't you know an old friend?"

I turned. Nadya was wearing an expensive silk dress. Her damaged hands were covered with white gloves. To Nadya, apparently, out of sight was out of mind.

"You look prosperous," I said.

"I got a very good price for my jewels—thanks to you, Richard. I'm staying here at the Gloucester."

"What about your French friends? I thought you were staying with them."

Nadya made a face. "Oh, they were boring. It's much gayer here at the Gloucester."

"Well," I said, "just be careful. Your husband is a man of great influence."

Nadya pouted. "Oh, Richard, don't be so depressing. What can my husband do to me in Hong Kong—even if he knows I'm here? This is British territory."

"Populated mainly by Chinese," I pointed out. "Just be careful."

"Of course, Richard. Now, come and have a drink."

"Sorry," I said, "I have an appointment. Good-bye, Nadya."

As was my usual practice, I checked the progress being made on the *Yongmin*, then went on to Mah Fong's office. After discussing a number of business matters, we went to the Alexandra Café for a drink. Mah Fong had tea, I had a double Scotch. I felt depressed.

"You appear troubled, Richard," Mah Fong finally remarked. "What is the difficulty?"

I shrugged. "Oh . . . everything. I seem to have nothing but bad luck. I'm plunging deeper and deeper into debt. I'm not free to go to the places where I want to go."

"Such as?"

"Oh, Malaya, the East Indies, Borneo. I want to resume my search for the *Agni Mani*."

"Is that the legendary stone that has become such an obsession with you, Richard?"

I felt annoyed. "It's not an obsession. It's simply something I believe in. It's something I want to find, to see—if possible, own. Is that so terrible?"

Mah Fong smiled at my rather childish outburst of temper. "Of course not, Richard. Everyone seeks something in life. The fortunate ones are those who know what they want." Mah Fong sipped his tea, then added, "Khoo Ah Lim has told me of your great interest in this stone, but I am most ignorant of such matters. Would you care to tell me of it?"

I related the history of the *Agni Mani* and described its reputed powers. When I had finished, Mah Fong was frowning.

"This stone," he said, "sounds like the *Huoh Chuh*."

"It's the same thing," I explained. "*Huoh Chuh* is simply the Chinese name for the gem."

"Then I know a man who has one."

Mah Fong spoke so calmly it was a few moments before I fully realized what he had said. I blurted, "You're joking!"

"Richard," the old Chinese gently reproved me, "I know how serious this matter is to you. I would not joke about it."

"Then who is this man?"

"A mandarin who was once a powerful official in the court of the emperor. After the revolution he was forced to flee from China."

"Where is he now?"

"Here in Hong Kong."

I was so excited I could hardly control my voice. "Mah Fong, can you take me to him?"

The agent looked doubtful. "The mandarin is now very old. He has retired to temple life and is devoting his final years to prayer and meditation. I would hesitate to intrude on him."

"You must!" I half shouted. "It's important!"

"To whom?" Mah Fong asked gently.

I calmed down. "All right, it's selfish of me. I'm asking you as a personal favor—take me to this man."

Mah Fong still looked doubtful. "It may not do any good. Those who retire to temple life are required to dispose of their worldly goods. The mandarin may have given his *Huoh Chuh* away."

"Well, let's find out!"

Mah Fong shrugged. "If you insist, Richard. May I finish my tea?"

Impatiently, I nodded, and the agent sipped the remains of his tea. Outside, there was another delay. Conveyances were at a premium after the storm, and we had to stand on a corner, trying to hail a taxi or rickshaw.

Beside me, squatting on the curb, a Chinese barber had just finished shaving a customer's head. As an added service, the barber inserted a slender spoon in the customer's ear and vigorously dug for wax. The customer must have enjoyed it, for he was ecstatically grinning at me. In my unreasoning exasperation, I could have pushed his silly face in.

Mah Fong finally hailed two sedan chairs. On the sweating shoulders of coolies, we were carried halfway up the Peak and set down before a small stone house adjoining a Buddhist temple. A monk in yellow robes answered our knock, ushered us inside, and went to bring the mandarin.

There was an air of peace in the room where we waited. A deep, cool-patterned Tientsin carpet covered the floor. Tall porcelain vases stood in the corners, and painted silk scrolls hung on the walls.

The mandarin entered so quietly I hardly heard him. He was a fragile little old man, almost transparent with age. His white hair was wispy, and a scant gray beard sprouted from his chin. Yet, surprisingly, his winglike eyebrows were black and virile, strangely fierce in comparison to the gentle eyes beneath.

"Welcome," the mandarin murmured, bowing low and showing the top of his black skullcap. He was wearing a long white robe, from which the toes of his black felt slippers peeped. "Please be seated."

We sat on blackwood chairs, elaborately carved in the outlines of blossoming peach trees. Clear green tea was served in eggshell cups. I sipped my tea, enduring the ritual of courtesies exchanged between Mah Fong and the mandarin. Both had many relatives, and each one, it seemed to me, had to be inquired about.

The mandarin finally smiled at me and said, "Please forgive an old man who lingers too long over memories. It is all I have left of value."

Boldly, at the risk of being thought impolite, I said, "I have heard you possess an object almost priceless in value—the *Huoh Chuh*."

The mandarin's eyebrows rose, ever so slightly. "You know of the *Huoh Chuh*?"

"I have searched for one for many years."

"May I ask why?"

"Because it is rare and precious."

Again the mandarin smiled. "Perhaps, like so many things in life, it is only the search that is precious. The object of your search may prove disappointing."

"One is entitled to discover one's own disappointments," I said, "and if one had no faith in a goal, then there would be no searches."

The mandarin nodded. "You are a young man, but wise."

"I do not deserve such praise," I humbly protested, "although I have long been fortunate in traveling through lands of ancient wisdom and mingling with men of knowledge and culture, such as you and my esteemed friend Mah Fong."

We all bowed to each other, signifying that the compliment had been sincerely made by Youth and graciously accepted by Age. My teacup was now empty, and I waited, rather anxiously, for the mandarin's next move. If I was offered more tea, it would mean my visit was welcome. If my empty teacup was ignored, it would mean I should go.

I was relieved when the mandarin motioned for an *amah* to refill our cups. He still had not admitted, however, that he possessed a *Huoh Chuh*. I remembered the \$100,000 Donna Mariquinha had offered for one of the stones, and I said, "I dislike to speak of such matters, but I trade in gems and am curious about one thing. What is the value of your *Huoh Chuh*?"

"The value of any object is only what it is worth to him who owns it," the mandarin replied. "To me, the *Huoh Chuh* is worth nothing."

My mouth must have fallen open, for the mandarin smiled at my surprise.

"The stone was given to me by the emperor," he explained. "As a symbol of high office and great power, it once meant much to me. Now high office and power mean nothing to me, and consequently, the stone means nothing. Until you mentioned it today, I had forgotten all about it."

I somehow found my voice. "Then you still have the *Huoh Chuh*?"

"Yes. Would you care to see it?"

I nodded, almost afraid to put my feverish anxiety into

words. The mandarin spoke to the *amah*, and after a brief absence she returned with a black silk ceremonial hat. A peacock feather extended from the crown, and at the base of the feather was a glistening black stone.

"This is the *Huoh Chuh*," said the mandarin.

He handed the hat to me, and I stared at the stone, quite transfixed. It was about the size of a grape, highly polished, catching all sorts of colors on its gleaming surface.

"It's . . . incredible," I heard myself murmur.

"Do you like it?" the mandarin asked.

Again I could only nod.

"It is a material thing," I heard the mandarin say, "and material things are only borrowed for our lifetime. They must be returned to the world when we join our ancestors or retire to the spiritual sphere. Therefore, young man, it would please me greatly if you would accept the *Huoh Chuh* as a gift."

I looked at the old man, wondering whether it was he or I who had gone crazy. "You're not serious!"

For answer, the mandarin took the hat, ripped the stone from the crown, and handed it to me. "It is yours—and may it bring you everything that you desire."

The stone felt slick to the touch, strangely cool. I seemed to go into a kind of daze. All I remember is saying good-bye to the mandarin at the door.

"I hope you never regret giving me the *Huoh Chuh*," I said.

"Why should I regret it?"

"Well . . . it's supposed to have mystic qualities. Don't you believe in such powers?"

The mandarin smiled. "I may have at one time. Now I believe only in the powers of the gentle Lord Buddha. Good-bye, young man, and good wishes."

We made our farewell bows, and I followed Mah Fong to the waiting sedan chairs. On the way back to town, almost furtively, I took the *Huoh Chuh* out of my pocket, cupped it in my hands, and studied it closely. The shock of acquiring the stone had passed now, and I should have been elated. Instead, as I gazed at the stone, I felt a curious letdown. In the clear light of day the *Huoh Chuh* looked black and shiny—nothing more.

I put the stone away and frowned, annoyed at myself. Was it as the mandarin had said—that it was the search that was precious, not the object? There was no doubt, now that I

had finally found a fire pearl, that I was disappointed. The trouble was, I didn't know what I was disappointed in—myself or the stone.

Back at the Gloucester, trying to make myself feel excited, I burst into our suite and held the stone under Gus's nose. He was lying on his bed, resting up for the night ahead.

"The *Huoh Chuh*!" I dramatically announced.

Gus looked from the stone to me as though I had gone mad. "The what?"

"The *Agni Mani*! The fire pearl! The magic stone I've been looking for all these years!"

Gus sat up, took the stone, and inspected it as I told him of the amazing manner in which I had acquired it. When I had finished, Gus looked up at me and said, "Frankly, Richard, this looks like an ordinary black stone to me."

"You're an idiot!" I shouted, annoyed with Gus now as well as myself. "You see nothing beyond the surface! Think of the history and tradition of the stone! Think of its rarity—its value! I can get a hundred thousand dollars for that gem! What do you think of that?"

"I think you should take the hundred thousand."

"Aw—" I snatched the stone out of Gus's hand, stormed into my own room, and slammed the door. I couldn't get away from Gus's logic, however. A hundred thousand dollars was a lot of money, and I could certainly use it—perhaps to find a better *Agni Mani*.

The thought of a new search instantly calmed my anger, revived my spirits. That was it! I'd sell this *Huoh Chuh* to Donna Mariquinha, pay off my debts, and sail away to seek a better *Agni Mani*—one that wouldn't disappoint me.

Happily, impulsively, I hurried off to catch the ferry to Macao.

I arrived at Macao after dark and immediately telephoned Donna Mariquinha.

"Richard!" she exclaimed. "You've come back! How wonderful!"

I was too impatient to bother with polite hellos. "I've got an *Agni Mani*!" I blurted.

There was a brief pause. Then the Donna, with a kind of controlled excitement, said, "Wait in front of the Macao Hotel, Richard. One of my men will pick you up."

Two of Donna Mariquinha's Eurasian bodyguards, in fact, pulled up to the hotel. I got into the car with them and drove

to the Donna's hilltop mansion. She was waiting for me in the lounge, her topaz eyes glittering with anticipation. She was wearing a flame-colored kimono. Apparently she had been too excited to dress properly.

"Is it true, Richard?" she asked, her voice huskier than ever. "Do you really have the *Agni Mani*?"

"I have it."

"But where—how did you get it?"

I told her the circumstances, omitting the fact that the stone had been given to me. I said I had paid a tremendous sum for it.

"And now," I said, seating the gambling queen on a sofa, before which a small table had been set, "you shall see for yourself!"

A shaded light had been arranged over a white velvet cloth on the table. Dramatically I placed the black stone on the cloth. "There!"

In the sharp light the *Huoh Chuh* seemed to come alive. Awed, Donna Mariquinha reached out for it. I could see her fingers were trembling.

"My fire pearl . . ." she whispered. "My fire pearl . . . at last!"

She cupped the stone in her hands, bowing before it as though it were an idol. For several moments, in fact, she appeared to be in prayer. Then the Donna took a jeweler's eyeglass, expertly fitted it into her right eye, and examined the stone.

The next thing I knew she had whirled on me, her eyes blazing with rage. "Liar!" she shrieked. "Cheat! Trickster!" Her clawlike fingers raked my face, drawing blood.

Taken completely by surprise, I tried to hold the mad-woman off. It was like trying to hold off a tigress. She bowled me to the floor, slashed my cheeks, tore my hair, ripped my coat, tried to gouge out my eyes.

I finally managed to shove the Donna away and rise to my knees. It was too late. The bodyguards had rushed into the room. One clipped me on the back of the neck with a judo blow. The other kicked me in the ribs. Gasping, holding my side, nearly unconscious with pain, I lay writhing on the floor.

One of the bodyguards had drawn his foot back to kick me below the ear—a lethal blow—but Donna Mariquinha stopped him. "No, he is mine! He tried to cheat me, and I shall be the one to kill him!"

Through a crimson haze—partly a reflection of her torn-open kimono—I could see the Donna standing over me. Her hair had come loose and was hanging about her face. Her blood-streaked fingers were still clenched in the shape of claws. She looked entirely capable of murder.

"At least," I managed to gasp, "let me know why I'm being killed."

"You know as well as I do!" She flung the *Huoh Chuh* at me, then the jeweler's eyeglass.

Weakly, I rolled over, retrieved the eyeglass, fitted it into my eye, and inspected the stone. Its concentric banded structure immediately told me it was cryptocrystalline oxide, popularly known as onyx. No wonder I had felt no magic from it!

I could have bitten my tongue in anger at myself. Khoo Ah Lim had once warned, "Always inspect gems and people most closely before making a decision about them," and my failure to do so had literally left me under threat of death. There was only one last desperate chance: to talk my way out of danger.

I removed the jeweler's glass from my eye and looked up at Donna Mariquinha. "You are right. This is not an *Agni Mani*—but I do not see why I should die because of that."

She bent down and almost spat at me. "You tried to cheat me! No one who tries to cheat Donna Mariquinha lives!"

"How did I try to cheat you?"

"You came here with this fake stone! You tried to take my money in return for it!"

"Who said anything about money?"

For a moment the Donna's flaming eyes flickered with doubt. She quickly thought back. It was true I had made no mention of money—although I had fully intended to do so. Luckily for me, I had not got around to it.

I quickly pressed my advantage. "I brought this stone to you as a token of my love for you. Did we not speak of love—and marriage? If you forgot, I did not. As soon as I obtained this stone, I could hardly wait to present it to you. My only failing was in my very urgency to express my love. I should have examined the stone before bringing it to you. My good intentions and my love remain unaltered. Do I deserve death for loving you?"

I had never spoken so eloquently in my life—and for good

reason. My very life depended on it. Fearfully, I waited for Donna Mariquinha's reaction.

It came in a rush, woman-like, complete with tears. She gathered me in her arms and sobbed, "Oh, Richard, Richard, what have I done to you! Can you ever forgive me!"

I could and did, infinitely grateful for my reprieve from death. My only desire was to get out of there and as far away from Donna Mariquinha as I possibly could. After I had been lifted onto the lounge and my face had been bathed, I said, "My suit is a mess. I'd better go to the hotel and get another one."

The Donna, with terrifying tenderness, was fixing a bandage to a bruise on my chin. "The Macao Hotel, darling?"

"Yes," I lied, "I left my bag there."

"I'll send one of my men for it."

Getting away from the Donna wasn't going to be easy. She had now turned intensely possessive. I struggled upright and said, "No, I really need some air. I'll get the bag myself."

"Then one of my men will drive you."

I had to settle for that. When we reached the hotel, the driver waited in the car while I went inside. I had no bag, of course. I simply went up to the second floor, hurried down the corridor, climbed through a window to the fire escape, scrambled down the iron ladder, and in the darkness ran as fast I could for the night ferry to Hong Kong. I just made it.

It was about three in the morning when I walked into the Gloucester Hotel. My face was scratched, scarred, and bandaged, my torn white suit splashed with vivid bloodstains. The British night clerk never said a word, although his eyebrows went up a little. He clearly considered that I was showing extreme bad taste in walking through the lobby in such an ungentlemanly condition.

Gus's reaction was more voluble. He had just arrived home himself and smelled of Scotch and lipstick. As he helped me out of my clothes and into a hot bath, he couldn't help chuckling, "I don't know, Richard. You keep warning me to be careful, but you're the one who gets into all the trouble!"

"Aw, shut up," I said, holding my aching side.

"No, seriously," Gus insisted, full of alcoholic wisdom, "you should think this whole thing over carefully, Richard. Searching for the *Agni Mani* doesn't seem to bring you any-

thing but trouble. Give it up before you get yourself killed."

Wearily I closed my eyes. Maybe he was right.

CHAPTER V

For the next few days I stayed in the hotel, reluctant to expose my scratch-streaked face to public gaze. A couple of my ribs were fractured, too, and I had to endure the bandages that a British doctor wrapped around me.

Mah Fong came every day and kept me informed of how the work was coming along on my ship. The agent was most apologetic over the trouble I had got into because of the false *Huoh Chuh*.

"It is a common practice in the Orient to name lesser stones after greater originals," he told me. "This is particularly so in ceremonial circles, where such stones have symbolic value. I am sure the mandarin had no idea his *Huoh Chuh* was not genuine."

"I am, too," I said. "Please don't tell the old gentleman what happened."

Mah Fong bowed. "I shall honor your wish, Richard."

Actually, in a way, I was glad the *Huoh Chuh* had turned out to be false. It had been a disappointment to me, even when I had thought it was genuine. A real *Agni Mani*, I was sure, would never disappoint me.

Meanwhile, Gus was suffering a minor disappointment of his own. Some girl had thrown him over for a British army officer, and Gus, on the rebound, was thinking of marrying a wealthy widow.

"She owns half a dozen ships," he boasted to Mah Fong and me one afternoon, "and has a big house up on the Peak. If I married her, I could live like a king."

Mah Fong said quietly, "A house where the woman rules is like a boat steered from the bow."

The gentle wisdom hit Gus hard. He stared at Mah Fong. "Say, that's right! Sometimes you Chinese are pretty smart!"

I winced at my friend's tactlessness, but Mah Fong appeared not to notice.

"Besides," he went on, smiling, "I have a business proposal that might have more appeal than an unhappy marriage."

"What is it?" I asked.

"A chance for you to pay off your debts and get to Malaya." I sat up. "How? What's the deal? What do we carry?"

"Coolies. Three hundred of them for the tin mines of Malaya."

I lost some of my enthusiasm. "Three hundred coolies! Where would we put them?"

"The holds of the *Yongmin* would provide adequate space. Coolies are used to squatting in cramped quarters."

"I don't know," I said doubtfully. "Is it legal?"

Mah Fong smiled. "You have never asked that question before, Richard. Is it a wise one?"

"Perhaps not," I admitted. "What's the pay?"

"One hundred American dollars per head—a total of thirty thousand dollars."

My doubts were immediately wiped away. I owed nearly \$20,000 in debts. I could pay these off, have my ship free and clear, and still make a profit of \$10,000.

I had only one more question. "When do we get paid?"

"When all the coolies are on board. The contractor will be at the dock to make payment in cash."

That did it. "It's a deal," I said.

We immediately began making preparations for the new venture. The *Yongmin*, now nearly shipshape again, was given a thorough check for the long voyage, and supplies were taken aboard. Then the captain, Chiang, refused to make the trip.

"Malaya too far," he claimed. "Ship too small."

This wasn't true. The *Yongmin* was capable of sailing any sea. Chiang himself recognized the inadequacy of his excuse, for he held his nose and said, "Coolies stink. Your ship never smell the same again."

You don't argue with a Chinese. You just wait for him to reach the truth in his own roundabout manner.

Chiang finally cupped his hands together and said, "This one of your ship's holds." He picked up a strong steel spring lying on the dock and compressed it in his hands. "This one hundred coolies in hold." He released the spring and it shot high in the air. "You squeeze coolies too tight and they spring back at you like this. Maybe somebody get hurt."

"That's nonsense," I said. "Coolies are docile."

"Not coolies like this. Many bandits, thieves, killers, and other criminals join such coolies to get out of the country."

"Among coolies they will turn to sheep," I insisted, and quoted a Chinese proverb, "Any stable can hold many friendly sheep."

"If they remain friendly," muttered Chiang.

He refused to change his mind, and I finally hired another captain, a big blond Dutchman named Peter Lagendijk. I also signed on a hard-drinking but capable Scotch engineer named Sandy McRae. Both were old hands in the Far East.

Chiang's warning about the coolies rankled in my mind, and I asked Mah Fong if I could inspect them before taking them aboard the *Yongmin*.

"Of course," the agent replied. "They're camped over on the mainland, out beyond Kowloon. We can hire a car and drive out there right now."

As we waited in the lobby of the Gloucester Hotel for the hired car, Gus wandered over to us. He looked a little puzzled.

"Have you seen Nadya Nadarova?" he asked me.

"No, and I don't want to see her. Why do you ask?"

"I had a date with her last night, but she didn't show up. Nobody's seen her around the hotel since yesterday."

"She's probably gone off with some new boyfriend," I said. "Stay away from her. She's poison."

Gus shrugged. "Maybe you're right. Where are you fellows going?"

"Over to the mainland to look over the coolies."

"Guess I'll go along," Gus decided. "Got nothing else to do."

When the car arrived, we all piled into the back seat, and the Chinese chauffeur drove down to the auto ferry dock. We crossed the channel, drove through the town of Kowloon, and out into the countryside beyond. Water-filled rice paddies reflected the pale blue sky, and in the distance coral-colored mountains loomed along the horizon. Chinese rice workers stood knee-deep in the paddies, backs bent, conical-shaped hats distinctive against the landscape.

The terrain gradually grew rugged. Villages and rice paddies were left behind, and the road turned into a rutted track. A Chinese cemetery stretched away to the right. There was no life at all in this desolate area, only a stark jumble of rocks, like the remains of a glacier.

"What forbidding country," muttered Gus.

"It is called the Valley of the Ghosts," Mah Fong explained. "At one time it was infested by bandits. It is now a kind of no-man's-land between China and the British territories. It is a good place for anyone to hide from the law—or to commit a crime."

We were now approaching a bamboo thicket, and the spidery, spiky outlines of the tall, thin trees added to the grimness of the countryside. Overhead, two big birds hovered ominously.

"Vultures," said Mah Fong. "They've probably discovered the carcass of a water buffalo."

"What would a water buffalo be doing this far from the rice paddies?" I said.

Mah Fong frowned. "That's right. Shall we stop and investigate?"

"Hell, no!" said Gus. "I don't want to go wandering around this God-forsaken spot!"

"Come on," I said. "It looks interesting. Besides, somebody just might be in trouble."

The chauffeur pulled over, and Gus, Mah Fong, and I got out. I immediately began to wonder if we had been wise in stopping. The very air seemed to smell of death. Even in the brittle, dry sunlight, there was an eerie atmosphere of stagnation and decay. As we walked toward the thicket, I could feel my lungs constricting, as though fearful of breathing that sinister air.

I started to sweat, too, and my heart pounded. I had an uneasy feeling of impending doom. We were headed toward the vultures, which were slowly circling on the far side of the thicket.

"We'd better go around," Mah Fong said. "It would be impossible to push through such thick bamboo. If a tree were to break off and snap back at us, it could spear right through an arm or puncture a chest."

Even going around the bamboo thicket was difficult, and we had to step cautiously. Some of the young bamboo shoots stood out of the ground as stiff and sharp as daggers.

My mouth felt dry now, yet the palms of my hands were clammy with sweat. I knew something dreadful had happened—even before we reached the other side of the thicket and I saw the figure hunched on the ground.

Gus and Mah Fong saw the figure at the same time, and we all stopped, literally paralyzed by horror. The macabre scene

was etched into my mind for all time: In the weirdly revolving shadows of the dark vultures, against the bleak background of the bamboo, a naked woman was tied and pegged to the earth in a position that forced her to remain sitting upright.

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Gus. "It's Nadya!"

He was right, although the once beautiful and gay White Russian was now hardly recognizable. Her eyes were open but glassy, and black ants crawled over her face, even in and out of her mouth. Her formerly flawless skin was covered with the ugly red marks of insect bites. She was sitting in a pool of her own blood.

I felt sick, deathly sick. I stood helplessly by as Mah Fong slashed the ropes holding Nadya to the ground. I had never seen such an intricate pattern of cruelty. The bonds were fastened to pegs all around the naked woman, some forming a harness fitted to her neck and shoulders, others tied to her hands and feet, holding her forward, unable to rise from her hunched position on the ground. Her hands and feet were purple from lack of circulation.

The worst was yet to come. Mah Fong motioned to me and said, "You must help."

He had removed all the ropes from Nadya and was holding her by one arm. "Take the other arm," he instructed me. "Pull straight up."

In a mingle of revulsion and compassion, I automatically did as I was told. As we lifted Nadya, blood gushed from her pelvis, and I saw she had been impaled on a bamboo shoot.

I nearly fainted, then quickly recovered in an explosion of rage. "What savagery! What barbarian could have done this!"

"Her husband, probably," said Mah Fong, tearing up his shirt to stanch Nadya's bleeding. "This is a classic Chinese torture for a wife who has been unfaithful. At dusk the woman is impaled on a young, sprouting bamboo shoot. The sharp shoot continues to grow and, overnight, will lengthen as much as three or four inches. It penetrates the vagina of the victim and stabs into the abdomen. The pain is extreme, but death comes slowly. In fact, if you will notice the slight fluttering beneath Nadya's breast, you will see she is still alive."

It seemed impossible, but it was true. Nadya somehow still retained a spark of life. Gus joined us, swearing and

weeping with the intensity of his emotions, and we worked desperately to save Nadya from bleeding to death. At last she stirred and whimpered feebly.

"Quickly," said Mah Fong. "We must get her to a hospital before she regains consciousness. She might be unable to bear the pain."

We wrapped Nadya in our coats and rushed her to the British hospital in Kowloon. She was given a blood transfusion and emergency treatment. Afterward a surgeon came out of the operating room and told us, "She will live—but not as a complete woman. For the rest of her life she probably will shrink from anything to do with sexual matters."

It seemed an ironic fate for a woman like Nadya. Later, when she had recovered enough to be questioned by police, she was too terrified to say much about what had happened to her. A gang of Chinese had kidnapped her—that's all she could bear to remember. Any attempt to question her about the sickening events that followed would reduce her to tears or screams. She didn't even want to think about the brutal ordeal.

"Her husband was behind this," I told the British police inspector in charge of the investigation. "I'll swear to that."

The inspector shrugged. "It wouldn't do any good. He was in Canton when all this happened. We couldn't prove anything against him."

There was little more we could do. Nadya didn't even want to see Gus and me, probably out of shame. All she wanted to do was leave the Orient. Gus and I helped out with money, and Nadya's French friends arranged for papers and tickets that would get her to Paris.

Meanwhile the *Yongmin* had been brought out of drydock, completely repaired, refitted, and painted. We berthed her on the Kowloon side and, late one night, took aboard the 300 coolies.

I never had got around to inspecting my live cargo, and this was my first view of the coolies. In the darkness they seemed quiet and peaceful enough. Like sheep, they padded after one another in three long lines across the deck and disappeared down the steep ladders into the holds. The murmur of voices rose through the open hatches as they unpacked their bundles, spread out reed mats, and maneuvered for space in the confined quarters.

There was no doubt that the coolies were cramped. Stand-

ing over one of the holds, I could see them squirming about. It was hot down there, and most of the coolies had stripped to shorts. In the dim orange glow of a few electric bulbs, their bare skin glistened. They looked like a mass of worms writhing in some minor inferno.

"Everything's all set," said Lagendijk at my elbow. "We can sail in an hour."

I went to my cabin, where Mah Fong and the Chinese contractor who had brought the coolies to the ship were waiting. The contractor handed over \$30,000 in cash, received his receipt, and left. I then paid Mah Fong the money I owed him.

The agent bowed to me. "May the gods watch over you, Richard."

I returned the formal bow. "May you prosper and live long in health, Mah Fong."

That was our farewell. An hour later, in darkness, the *Yongmin* inched away from the dock and slowly moved out into the channel. Dawn was staining the sky as I stood on the bridge and looked back at the dark, receding outline of Hong Kong. All my life, it seemed, I had been leaving someplace at dawn.

CHAPTER VI

I slept through most of our first day out from Hong Kong. My experiences with Donna Mariquinha and Nadya Nadarova had left me physically and emotionally exhausted, and the oblivion of sleep was just what I needed. I felt much better the second day, which was warm and sunny. The sea was calm.

Gus's spirits had revived, too, and he spent much of his time dangling a fishing line overboard. He rarely caught anything, but the fact that he was doing something seemed to give him a sense of importance.

"I turn over all the fish I catch to the coolies," he told me. "Those poor devils haven't got much more than rice to eat."

This was true, although it wasn't my fault. Food for the coolies was supposed to have been provided by the contractor. In fattening his own fee, he had skimmed on the supplies

of dried fish and vegetables. I had added to this all the food we could spare from our own stocks.

A greater problem, however, was preparing and serving food for the 300 Chinese below decks. Our galley was kept steaming almost 24 hours a day with boiling pots of rice and fish. These were carried into the holds by appointed coolies and dished out to the others.

Sanitation was another problem. Some of the coolies used toilet facilities in the forecabin, although the crew didn't take kindly to this. Others used buckets, which were dumped overboard. It wasn't long before, as Chiang had warned, the *Yongmin* began to smell strongly of fish, rice, human sweat and excrement.

Fortunately, in the fine tropical weather, we were able to leave the hatches off the holds. This gave the coolies at least a little air. They were also allowed on deck in groups for exercise.

Lagendijk didn't like the looks of some of the coolies, particularly a gang quartered in the forward hold.

"They're a bunch of thugs if ever I've seen one," he remarked to me.

I was inclined to agree with the Dutchman. Several of these particular coolies bore knife or bullet scars, and they all had an air of violence. Sounds of gambling came constantly from the forward hold, and occasionally I could smell opium or *samsu*. I didn't mind the opium, which only puts its smokers to sleep, but the liquor worried me. I'd seen more than one Chinese go berserk from strong drink.

While I was debating with myself whether or not to confiscate the *samsu*, the weather diverted my attention. Heavy dark clouds rolled up from the east and blacked out the sky. The wind rose, and the sea turned gray. Vicious whitecaps were whipped up all around us, like the bared teeth of a pack of wild animals.

I made my way up to the bridge, where Lagendijk was checking the barometer. It reassured me to see the burly Dutchman calmly puffing his pipe.

"Any fear of another typhoon hitting us?" I asked.

Lagendijk shook his head. "Oh, no—we're too far south. We only have to cross the Gulf of Siam to reach Malaya." He peered out at the rising sea. "But we're in for a bad gale."

The *Yongmin* was now pitching and tossing. I had to grab a rail to keep from being flung from my feet. The wind

whistled in the rigging, and a slashing rain began to fall. The roar of the storm was deafening.

"I gave orders to close the hatches," Lagendijk bellowed to me as he struggled into his yellow oilskins. "Those poor devils below are going to have a rough time of it. They'll be tossed around like dice in a box."

I stayed on the bridge until nightfall, watching the waves crash over the bow. Stinging spray lashed our faces, and the decks were constantly awash. Ropes had been strung along and across them to provide handholds for the crew.

I was worried about our human cargo. Before retiring, I checked the holds with Lagendijk. Most of the coolies in the two aft holds were miserably seasick. They and their belongings had been grotesquely tumbled together by the gale. Some of the coolies were retching violently. Others lay moaning in their own vomit, too spent to move.

"Is there anything we can do for them?" I asked Lagendijk, who had worked before on ships carrying coolies.

He shook his head. "Nothing. They'll just have to suffer until the storm blows itself out."

There was less misery in the forward hold. Some of the gambling games were still going, and one sullen-eyed thug took a swig out of his *samsu* bottle, as though daring me to do something about it. Another, a brutal-looking character with knife scars on both cheeks, angrily shouted in Cantonese, "Hey, white devils, why don't you let us out of this stinking hole?"

Lagendijk sternly replied, "Any more talk like that and you'll find yourself in a worse hole—with chains on you!"

I thought it best to reason with the men.

"How can we let you out?" I said. "If you go on deck, you'll be swept away by the storm."

"And if we stay down here, we'll drown like rats!" retorted Scarface. "The ship will sink, and we'll go down with it, buried alive in the sea!"

This was dangerous talk, the kind that could set off a panic.

"That's nonsense!" I quickly replied. "This is a good, strong ship. It can weather any storm. You're safer down here than the seamen on deck. Just keep calm. The storm is already blowing itself out."

Scarface muttered something and some of his fellow thugs glared at me. Some of the other coolies, I noticed, looked frightened. I could only hope for the best. As Lagendijk and

I left the hold, the captain locked the heavy steel door behind us.

"Better not take any chances," he remarked.

I fully agreed with him. In my cabin I wedged myself in my bunk with pillows and fell into a fitful half sleep.

I was awakened by the engineer, Sandy McRae. His face, which usually had a whisky glow, looked redder than ever.

"What's the trouble?" I mumbled, sitting up.

"Hell's broken loose in the forward hold! The coolies are fighting among themselves!"

"Damn!" I swore and grabbed my clothes. "Get Gus!"

I quickly dressed and lurched out of my cabin. The rain had stopped, but the wind was still strong. I rolled with the ship as I groped through pitch darkness to the bridge. The compass lights shone upward on the Chinese seaman at the wheel, turning his face into a shadowy Oriental mask.

Lagendijk was in the charthouse. I staggered over and held to the doorpost to brace myself. The captain had unlocked the gun closet and was taking out two pistols and two rifles.

"Is it that bad?" I asked him.

The Dutchman grimly nodded. "'Fraid so. From the sounds coming out of that forward hold, everyone inside's run amok. We may have to shoot a few to break it up."

"Is that necessary?" I said. "Can't we just let them fight themselves out?"

Lagendijk locked the gun closet and shrugged. "Sure, if you want to take a chance on having your ship burned up. Those madmen down there have matches. After they get tired of slaughtering one another, they just might set fire to the ship. I don't care for the idea of being roasted to death at sea."

Neither did I. I joined Lagendijk in loading the firearms. When Gus came in, I handed him one of the pistols. He was sleepy but curious.

"What started the riot?" he wanted to know.

"Probably a fight that broke out among the gamblers," said McRae. "Some of those thugs have been spoiling for a brawl, anyway. They're drunk, and they've got knives—so watch yourselves."

Gus blinked. "You mean, only the four of us are going down there?"

"Only three of us," Lagendijk corrected him. "McRae will stay on deck in case any of those wild men get past us."

"But why take chances?" demanded Gus. "Why not arm some of the crew?"

"Because the crewmen are all Chinese—and one berserk Chinese can turn a crowd of others into a howling mob, no matter how peaceful they might normally be. If we give guns to the crew, they might be turned on us in the heat of the fight."

Gus tried to grin. "Oh, well, the odds are only thirty-three to one against us. Let's go!"

Lagendijk led the way, carrying a rifle. Gus and I followed, pistols in hand. McRae remained on deck, a rifle under one arm.

Below decks, a narrow, dank passageway led to the door of the forward hold. A single bare bulb glowed feebly over the door, and even through the heavy steel we could hear the riotous sounds within. Shouts and cries were punctuated by oaths and screams. Occasionally something heavy crashed against a wall.

Lagendijk glanced at Gus and me. "All set?"

We nodded, and the captain unlocked the door. As it swung open, a torrent of sound flooded out, almost overpowering in its impact. It was like stepping into a huge drum that was being pounded on all sides.

For a few seconds I could only stand there, taking in the bizarre, ear-splitting scene. It looked like a sideshow in hell—or a pack of mad dogs trying to get at one another's throats. In the dusky light knives flashed like fangs. Blood-spattered faces were distorted in anger or pain. Fists swung and thudded against flesh and bone. Clubs came down crushingly on human skulls. Iron bolts flew through the air.

I stared unbelievably at one coolie who was biting another's nose off. Other Chinese fought like women, shrieking and scratching. Clothes were torn, faces clawed, skin slashed. Insane rage was reflected in scores of wildly rolling eyes. Legs and arms flailed grotesquely.

A number of coolies lay on the floor, either stabbed to death or knocked unconscious. Others writhed in agony, desperately grasping their red-smeared wounds. All the slop buckets had been bowled over, and their foul contents flowed back and forth with the blood and vomit that covered the floor. In this

slippery footing the frenzied mob swayed with every roll of the ship, tripping or trampling over the fallen.

The senseless fury of the scene must have infected me, for I suddenly found myself angrily yelling, "Stop it, you fools! Stop it! Stop it."

In that din, of course, my voice could be heard only by myself. Lagendijk took more drastic action. He fired his rifle over the heads of the rioters. The sharp, resounding report had a dramatic effect. All sound and action were abruptly stilled. In an almost comical tableau of upraised fists and open mouths, the coolies stared at us.

"Everyone kneel on the floor!" Lagendijk ordered. "Throw away your knives and clubs and clasp your hands above your heads!"

Some of the coolies automatically obeyed, like a man who's been slapped in the face. Others just stood there, still startled by our appearance. Scarface was the first to recover. He pushed his way forward, spat at us, and snarled, "*Pah! Pah!*"

This is a dreaded cry in the Orient, where it has started more than a few murderous riots against Europeans. It literally means, "Kill! Kill!" but it seems to have far more emotional power than the words themselves might imply. I have seen Oriental mobs worked into almost hypnotic rage by the chanting of "*Pah! Pah!*"

Now, in the hold, at least half of the coolies took up the cry. "*Pah! Pah!*" My fear mounted with the fast-rising pitch of their hate. I glanced at Lagendijk. He had leveled his rifle at the coolies, some of whom appeared ready to rush us.

"Don't shoot to kill!" I implored him, torn between the twin horrors of killing or being killed.

"It's our lives or theirs," the Dutchman muttered, taking aim. "I'll put a bullet through the head of the first son-of-a-bitch who rushes me!"

The trouble was, there was no first. At least 25 of the Chinese broke for us at the same time, screaming, "*Pah! Pah!*" I heard the crack of Lagendijk's rifle, and I saw the spot where the .303 slug slammed into the forehead of one of the coolies. It looked as if a black beetle had suddenly been squashed there. Yet the coolie kept coming toward us, virtually dead but running by mechanical reflex. Then he went into the almost slapstick reaction of a man who has been hit by a heavy bullet. His legs did a staggering little dance, his

eyes revolved ludicrously, and his arms made the zany gestures of a drunk who has lost his balance and is falling.

After that, there were no clear details—only whirling, bright-colored fragments. In the melee I saw only flashes of faces, eyes, teeth, claws. I lashed out with my pistol, still reluctant to shoot.

Gus was not so squeamish. He fired at a shrieking coolie, who went down with an abrupt gurgle, clutching his throat. Other coolies swarmed over the fallen body. One reached out for Lagendijk's rifle barrel. A point-blank shot blew the coolie's stomach wide open, spattering us all with blood and entrails.

Another maddened Chinese succeeded in grabbing the captain's gun barrel. Lagendijk yanked it away and swung the rifle like a club. "*Verdomme!*" the big Dutchman swore. His violent swings flattened at least two more coolies.

By now I was too busy to pay any attention to the others. Scarface had grappled with me, his evil face close to mine, his screaming mouth wide open, his distorted lips flecked with spittle. I sensed before I actually saw the knife that plunged into my left shoulder, then came out, dripping blood, ready to plunge again. I fired my pistol into Scarface's belly, and the force of the bullet drove him back from me. Four or five other coolies quickly took his place, literally climbing all over me.

There was no time for fear—or even to think. I fought by instinct, hurling some of the Chinese from me, shooting others. Once I went down on my knees beside Gus, and I felt about half a dozen coolies go clambering over us like half-backs bucking a scrimmage line. It was impossible to go after them. McRae would have to handle them, and I fervently hoped his rifle would prove capable of the job. If the coolies gained control of the decks, I knew, we would indeed be doomed.

Somehow Gus and I staggered to our feet and braced ourselves against the pitch of the ship. Fortunately, at that moment the bow dipped deep into the trough of a wave, causing most of our attackers to reel back from us. They piled up against the far end of the hold.

Lagendijk, I could see, still had his rifle gripped like a club. The stock had been battered loose—and for good reason. Seven or eight coolies lay piled about the Dutchman.

"Vuile gladdakkers!" he bellowed, spitting blood. "There's too many of the little yellow bastards!"

"Let's get this door closed and get out of here!" I yelled back.

That was easier said than done. The doorway was jammed with bodies. I tried to shove some of them aside, but a bolt sailed through the air and struck me just above the left eye. Blood gushed from my forehead, and I literally saw red. Stunned and enraged, I fired the last two bullets in my pistol at the rioters.

Gus, who had been feverishly reloading his gun, then took over. He fired at the feet of the coolies, keeping them from organizing another charge. They could still throw things, however, and we were pelted with tin cups, plates, teapots, sticks, slop buckets, and knives. A clay water jug crashed against the wall just over my head as Lajendijk and I were pulling and pushing the last of the bodies out of the doorway.

I swore, shook off the fragments of the jug, and swabbed blood from my left eye with my shirt sleeve. One of the coolies on the floor, I saw, had suddenly come alive and tackled Gus by the legs. I grabbed Gus to keep him from being thrown to the floor, Lajendijk kicked the coolie away, and we finally managed to slam the door shut. Lajendijk quickly locked it.

We were all badly cut and bruised, but there was no time to bother with our wounds. We could hear high-pitched screams from above.

"Those goddamn coolies who escaped may be slaughtering the crew!" Lajendijk exclaimed. "Let's get on deck!"

We hurried along the passageway and scrambled up the ladder. As we emerged on deck, we were enveloped by what seemed to be a cloud of hot white mist. Through gaps torn in it by the wind, I could see three of the coolies pressed back against a wall, their eyes wide with terror, their arms thrown up protectively. Something had scared all the fight out of them.

I soon saw what it was. The three other coolies lay writhing on the deck. Their clothes had been blasted off them, and their naked flesh was a livid, glowing crimson. They were dead, but their bodies still jerked and cringed from the terrible shock that had killed them. Their eyes bulged out like boiled eggs.

The hot mist was rent by another gust of wind, and I could

see McRae. He had a hose in one hand and was standing over the writhing coolies.

"I knew a rifle wouldn't stop them," he said. "I gave them live steam."

We all stared at the scalded coolies.

"Boiled alive," Gus gasped, "like lobsters!"

That was the end of the night's violence. Even the storm subsided, as though awed by the ghastly events aboard the *Yongmin*. Lagendijk and McRae put the last of the escaped coolies in irons, while Gus and I got out first-aid equipment. Lagendijk later joined us in the saloon, and we spent the rest of the night patching each other up.

We had all taken bad beatings. The captain had lost two teeth, and his face was blue with bruises. Gus had a shoulder wound, a broken finger, and several nasty bites on his right forearm. Along with my stabbed shoulder and the gash over my eye, I had been slashed on my left forearm and right hand—mementos of that murderous night which I carry to this day.

At daybreak we had one of the hatches removed from the forward hold and, with leveled rifles, inspected the coolies below. They had worked off their insane rage and now looked merely miserable. If I had not remembered how close they had come to killing me, I might have felt sorry for them.

The toll among the coolies was terrible. Eight were dead, 12 were severely wounded, and about 40 suffered lesser injuries. The dead bodies were dumped in the sea, and the wounded were given first-aid.

I worried about what was going to happen when we reached Malaya, and I spent most of my time fretting over a report on the mutiny. I wasn't even sure whether I had broken any laws in carrying the human cargo in the first place.

Lagendijk and McRae tried to ease my fears.

"Overcrowded China's glad to get rid of her surplus coolies," the captain told me, "and labor-short Malaya's glad to get them. Maybe there is some petty rule or regulation about just switching the little yellow heathens around like we've done, but nobody's going to bother about it. We deliver the goods, and that's all there is to it."

"Besides," put in McRae, "the chief of police at Kuala Trengganu is an old chum of mine. He's a good bloke. Won't give us any trouble at all."

As it turned out, McRae was right. We put into the pleasant little port of Kuala Trengganu, on the east coast of Malaya, at sunrise one morning. Lagendijk and McRae went ashore and came back with the chief of police and an apologetic Chinese, who turned out to be the agent for the mining firm which had contracted for the coolies.

"Will pay for damage to ship," the agent kept saying, nervously fingering a roll of bills. "Just say how much."

I was surprised. I had expected trouble, and here I was being offered money. I looked at the chief of police. He was a heavy-set Briton with a military moustache. He wore wide shorts, which exposed his tree-trunk knees, and a cap that looked as impressive as an admiral's. His shoulders were bright with stars, and he kept slapping his swagger stick against his legs.

"Now that's a very sporting offer," he said to me. "Why don't you accept it like a good fellow?"

I held out my report on the mutiny. "Don't you want to see this?"

The police chief glanced at the papers and winced. "Oh, now, really, old sport, you're not going to make an official complaint, are you? I'd have to hold these three hundred heathens, and my jail only has room for two drunks and a chicken thief. Besides, the bloody paper work involved is endless. You don't want that, do you?"

"All I want," I said, "is to get these coolies off my ship."

"Now, that's a good fellow!" The chief pointed his swagger stick at the agent. "You heard the gentleman! Get your unmannerly heathens off his ship!"

Within half an hour a fleet of fishing boats was clustered around the *Yongmin*, taking off the coolies. They scurried down the gangway, some swathed in bandages, others carrying their wounded. They seemed as glad to get away from me as I was to see the last of them.

CHAPTER VII

We took it easy for the next few days. While the *Yongmin* was being cleaned, Gus and I moved ashore to the Rest

House. This was a government-run hotel that overlooked the harbor.

Gus, despite his wounds, was immediately off to see what local romance he could stir up. I was content to sit on the veranda, sipping a cold drink and enjoying the tropical view. The sparkling white beach was lined with graceful palms, which swayed gently in the breeze. Out on the blue water copper-colored fishermen hauled in their nets. Farther down, in the estuary, white and orange sailing boats lay anchored, some with fierce eyes and teeth painted on the bow to frighten away storm spirits. Near the shore bamboo huts stood on high poles, half in and half out of the water.

It was a lazy peaceful scene—only one of the many sides of Malaya. This is a fascinating land, exotic and spectacular in its contrasts. Sweltering jungles and air-conditioned skyscrapers are often only a few miles apart. You can dine in a luxury hotel one night and be chased by a tiger the next.

In many ways Malaya is the United States of the Far East. It is a rich peninsula, extending more than 500 miles from the underbelly of Asia. For centuries it was carved up into nearly a dozen states, each ruled by a sultan or potentate. When the British took over in the 19th century, these states were loosely joined into a union. The sultans still sat on their thrones, but British civil servants took care of actual administration.

This was all right with the Malays, a handsome, happy-go-lucky people who would much rather play than work. The land was lush enough to support them with little effort, they felt, so why exert themselves? They looked on in head-shaking amusement as the busy British brought in Chinese coolies, Indian low-castes, Ceylonese laborers, and others to sweat over the arduous tasks of clearing the dense jungles, building roads and railway lines, planting vast rubber estates, and digging tremendous deposits of tin out of the earth.

Today Malaya is independent. The British, who started the melting pot boiling, have relinquished their governing rights but have left behind a tradition of stability. Educated young Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ceylonese, Siamese, Burmese, and Javanese—many, as in America, the sons and daughters of poverty-stricken immigrants attracted to a prosperous country—have taken over civil service posts. Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, and Christians mingle freely in the same places of business, cafés, movie houses,

and political clubs, yet worship without restraint in their own temples.

The Malays are still easygoing and indifferent to money-making. The shrewd Chinese, hard workers as well as good businessmen, have taken over economic control of the country. The power of the dollar, rather than the power of politics, is what interests these people. As a Chinese millionaire once remarked to me in Malaya, "We don't care who holds the cow as long as we can milk it."

I mention all this only because I have long felt that Malaya is one of the least understood, yet most important countries of the Orient. It has never asked for or received a penny of the billions of dollars the United States has shoveled out in aid to other countries, yet it has fought and won a long and costly war to wipe out Communist guerrillas who infiltrated its jungles. It has provided a splendid example of how orderly government can be formed out of multiracial conflicts. Yet on the rare occasions when one reads of Malaya, it's usually about a sultan with four wives, a man-eating tiger, a roundup of opium addicts, or a 30-foot python found waltzing on the terrace of a hotel ballroom. These situations do exist, but only in the same sense that gangsters exist in Chicago.

The role of the British in the Orient has never been completely understood, either. The popular picture of a stiff-necked, stubborn, stupid colonialist is merely a caricature. Such a breed could never have built up, then turned over to the natives such nations as India, Burma, Ceylon, and Malaya.

It's true there were and still are some stuffed shirts among British bureaucrats in the Far East. The harm these sticklers for red tape might have done is far outweighed by the good performed by officials like the chief of police at Kuala Trengganu, who believed in the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

The chief and I became good friends. He used to stop by at the Rest House and sit with me on the veranda. Someone had told him I was a nobleman—in name, at least—and I think he found this difficult to reconcile with my husky build and battered face. In his forthright way he once said, "By George, Baron, you don't look my idea of an aristocrat at all."

I smiled. "I left all that behind me a long time ago. Besides, it's only a title. My family's estates have shrunk."

"It doesn't seem to bother you, old sport."

"No," I admitted, "even if I were rich, I'd still be roaming the Orient much as I am now."

Inevitably, as I did with almost everyone I met, I told the chief about my search for an *Agni Mani* and asked if he'd ever heard of the stone.

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so. But then I'm not up on such subjects. I'll make inquiries around town for you."

The next day, while I was strolling along the waterfront, the chief fell into step beside me. Quite casually he said, "I say, old sport, it occurred to me that the sultan might know of that stone you're interested in. Would you like to meet him?"

"Would I!" I said. "Of course! Can you arrange it?"

"Oh, yes. The sultan's an old chum of mine. He's got a date to kill a tiger tomorrow, but perhaps I can arrange an interview for you later."

I had to sort the chief's words out carefully, to make sure I'd heard right. "He's got a date to what?"

"Kill a tiger. Does it every year at this time. A kind of festival to show his subjects he's still quite a boy. Stands in an arena surrounded by the cheering populace and all that. Enter the tiger. Sultan slays the beast with a sword. Like to see the show?"

"I certainly would."

"Good. I'll pick you up right after lunch."

The chief's car—a little English sedan driven by a Malay syce—had been moving along beside us. The chief got in and drove off, and I continued strolling along the roadside. Shadows of swaying palms covered the ground around me with a moving, fishbone pattern. The warm air was heavy with floral fragrance. A group of wild banana plants grew nearby, the bright green leaves splashed with stalks of yellow fruit.

The people I passed looked as exotic as the countryside. Three Malay girls sat by the roadside, their luminous eyes dark and enormous in their velvety brown faces. They glanced at me shyly as I approached, and one of the girls, with the inborn courtesy of her race, murmured, "*Tabek, tuan.*" ("Good-day, sir.")

I stopped to watch the girls at work. They were making garlands of white and red flowers, probably for the next day's festival.

"How beautiful," I said in Malay. I meant the garlands,

but I could quite well have been describing the girls themselves. Their hair was black and lustrous, brushed back from the brow and decorated with white blossoms. They wore colorful sarongs and white lace jackets—clothes that could not have been better designed to show off their slender yet voluptuous figures.

My presence embarrassed the girls. They kept glancing at me and breaking into giggles. Finally, unable to contain their merriment, they got up and ran toward an *attap* hut, laughing. Even running, they retained a ballet-like grace, their backs straight, all movement flowing from their rounded hips.

Farther along, a pair of tots came toward me, lugging a basket of mangoes and custard apples. The kids, a boy and a girl, were naked except for short sarongs, and their skin was the color of cinnamon. "*Tabek, tuan,*" said the boy, and held out a mango to me. I took it and offered him a coin, but he backed away, grinning and shaking his head.

I watched as the children carried the fruit into a yard across the road. Other youngsters, most of them stark naked, were perched on the rungs of a bamboo ladder reaching up to the entrance of a high-set hut. A bronze, well-built Malay lay sleeping in the shade under the hut, surrounded by long-legged poultry which lazily scratched the bare earth.

The kids placed the basket of fruit beside the Malay, and he opened one eye. Carefully he selected one of the custard apples and bit into the juicy flesh. Then he closed his eye again and continued to chew, apparently eating and sleeping at the same time.

I had to smile. This was indeed a blessed land.

The next day Gus went along with me to see the Sultan of Trengganu kill a tiger. The big event was held in the courtyard of the *Istana*, the royal palace, where elevated seats had been erected around an arena. The chief of police made sure we had choice seats in a roofed pavilion, then hurried off to attend to his duties.

I looked around at the colorful gathering. A few British colonial officers, some wearing their plumed ceremonial hats, sat near me, their ruddy features swamped in a sea of excited brown faces. On the far side of Gus sat a row of royal princes and courtiers, resplendently dressed in green silk tunics and golden sarongs. Behind us spread a chattering

crowd of about 2,000 Malays dressed in their brightest jackets and sarongs.

Under the blazing sun I could feel a growing sense of excitement. A flock of screeching green parakeets flew across the arena, causing some of the crowd to laugh and point. *Satay* sellers moved up and down the aisles, doing a booming business with their bits of barbecued chicken on the end of a stick.

A gong struck, and the babel of voices abruptly hushed. Everybody stood up, including the British officials, and Gus and I did likewise. On the far side of the arena a gate opened, and a fat, elderly Malay waddled out. This was the sultan. He wore a yellow silk turban, a black jacket, and a short gold sarong with white trousers underneath. In his right hand he held a sword that glittered and flashed in the sunlight.

Everybody bowed and sat down, and again Gus and I followed suit. Gus squinted at the sultan and remarked, "He looks pretty old and fat to be tangling with a tiger."

I was thinking the same thing as I watched the sultan waddle to the center of the arena. He held his sword high and shouted, "*Rimaul!*"

At this signal a small trapdoor snapped open across the arena. Slowly a tiger appeared. He was a magnificent beast, tawny and gleaming, ears flattened to his skull, fangs bared. A murmur of impressed excitement rippled through the crowd.

But the tiger apparently had bared his fangs merely in a yawn. He was no sooner out of his cage than he flopped to the ground, wearily surveyed the crowd, and rested his chin on his forepaws. He was not to rest in peace, however, for two Malays carrying spears rushed from the sidelines and prodded the tiger in the rear.

The huge beast lurched to his feet and growled, and the two men with spears fell back. To get away from them, the tiger advanced into the arena, utterly indifferent to the sultan, who was theatrically posturing, sidestepping, and swishing his sword. Only after the animal had wandered in a half circle did it display any interest in the sultan. It crouched low, tail twitching, head down, yellow eyes glinting. For a moment it looked as though the tiger might spring. Then it yawned again and prepared to lie down.

At this point the sultan decided to strike. He lunged forward and rammed his sword between the tiger's shoulder blades.

The animal shuddered and half rose, then rolled onto its side and lay still. A roar went up from the crowd. The sovereign accepted the cheers with a kind of bored pride, then waddled offstage.

"That was a fixed fight if ever I've seen one," said Gus, disgusted.

"Maybe the tiger was sick," I suggested, watching half a dozen Malays who were preparing to remove the beast. They all carried spears and were trying to roll the animal over so they could string him to a long pole.

Suddenly, startlingly, the tiger reared and writhed through the air like a great tawny streak of lightning. It bowled over two of the screaming Malays and flattened another with a tremendous blow of its paw. The remaining three Malays recovered in time to thrust their spears into the tiger's exposed belly. It collapsed in its own blood, undeniably dead this time. The whole violent scene, a kind of added attraction which outshone the main event, was over almost before the crowd realized what had happened.

"That tiger wasn't sick!" I gasped.

The chief of police, who had come back for us, overheard me. "No," he grinned, "Just doped."

"You mean, the fight was fixed?"

The chief made a wry face. "Well, really, now, old sport, you wouldn't expect the sultan to risk his life just to put on a ruddy show, would you? Of course, the tiger was drugged. Unfortunately, the old man only pinked it with that sword of his. Then, when the drug wore off, the tiger showed his true stripes." The chief grinned again. "Come on, I'll introduce you to His Highness, the Hero."

Actually, although the chief of police got Gus and me into the *Istana*, we couldn't get anywhere near the sultan. The fat potentate lounged on a pile of cushions, completely surrounded by fawning admirers. Most of them, the chief told me, were minor members of royalty who formed a kind of yes-man corps to the sultan.

The elaborate but somewhat musty rooms were thronged with guests, all celebrating the killing of the tiger. The Malays, forbidden by their Muslim religion to drink alcohol, carried glasses of fruit juice. The Chinese and Europeans hoisted Scotch highballs, an occupation in which Gus enthusiastically joined.

I had been looking forward to asking the sultan if he knew anything about the *Agni Mani*. When it proved impossible to reach him, the chief of police sensed my disappointment and said, "Wait here, old sport. I've just remembered the chap you should see."

He came back in a few minutes with a tall, slender Malay dressed in a royal sarong.

"This is Prince Mamoud," the chief explained, "the custodian of the sultan's treasure house. He might know of that stone you're interested in, old sport."

Prince Mamoud was so polite he seemed almost diffident. When I asked him about the *Agni Mani*, he smiled and said, "I have indeed heard of this famous stone, but the royal house of Trengganu has never been fortunate enough to possess one."

"Do you know of any royal house that has possessed one—or has one now?"

The prince hesitated, then replied, "I have heard rumors, of course, but I shall not mislead you with tales that might be false. May I ask where you are going when you sail from Kuala Trengganu?"

"Singapore, probably."

"Then I suggest you speak to the Sultan of Singapore. I have heard there was once an *Agni Mani* in his royal house, and he might be able to help you. I can give you a letter of introduction to him if you like."

I gladly accepted the prince's offer, and later, when Gus and I left the palace, I had the letter safely tucked in an inside pocket. I felt a pleasant glow of achievement. I wanted to sail for Singapore at once—yet as we strolled through the silky tropical night, I also felt I never wanted to leave this lazy, paradisiacal coast.

In the center of town the festival was still going strong. Orchestras played swirling Malayan dance music, and laughing men, women, and children milled about in the glow of lanterns strung across an open square.

Near a fruit stand we ran into Lagendijk and McRae, both half-drunk and in a happy mood. The big Dutchman held up a fruit that looked like a spiky football. "The durian is in season!" he crowed. "The fruit of the goddess of love! Have some, my friends!"

I laughed and held my nose, having already had some experience with durians. This strange fruit stinks like rotten

onions, yet tastes like a mixture of whipped cream, peaches, custard, strawberries, and honey. Lagendijk split open his durian, and we all had some of the creamy insides, holding our noses with one hand and eating with the other.

"Don't eat too much," warned McRae. "The Malays have a saying, '*Durian djato, sarong naik*,' meaning, 'When the durian falls from the tree, it raises the sarong.' It's a great sexual stimulant."

That, of course, put ideas into Gus's head and he hauled Lagendijk and McRae off to a cabaret that featured dancing girls.

I strolled on to the Rest House. When I went in, a paddle fan was slowly revolving in the high ceiling. The Malay night clerk was sprawled in a wicker chair, sound asleep. He had removed his shirt and shoes, and his bare feet were propped up on the desk. Behind him, the pendulum of an ancient grandfather clock swung timelessly, indifferent to the fact that there was only one hand on the yellowed dial.

It was the hour hand. In Malaya—or at least this part of Malaya—minutes didn't seem to matter.

CHAPTER VIII

Singapore is truly the crossroads of the East. As the *Yong-min* moved carefully through the busy harbor, ocean liners towered over us, sampans bobbed across our bow, and brisk little launches scooted in and out of traffic like water beetles. We passed tarred two-masted Malay schooners, weirdly painted boats from the Celebes, and countless Chinese junks, some with their sails spread for drying.

Along the shore, I could see the city's commercial center, with house flags fluttering above mercantile and shipping companies. The massive buildings gleamed like white marble in the bright sunlight. Off to the right, through the inevitable palm trees, rose the Gothic spire of St. Andrew's Cathedral. Above it all loomed the military barracks on Fort Canning Hill, where British colors flew. I wondered where the Sultan of Singapore lived. I was anxious to get ashore and question him about the *Agni Mani*.

We dropped anchor in the inner roads, and Gus and I went ashore in a sampan. We only had to cross Beach Road to check into Raffles Hotel, where the Indian clerk proudly informed us that modern plumbing had just been installed. A few minutes later I was luxuriating in the depths of a Roman-style bath.

Refreshed, Gus and I called on Mr. Yee, a Chinese freight broker who had been recommended to us by Mah Fong. Mr. Yee had spent some time in San Francisco and was thoroughly Americanized.

"Hi, fellas!" he greeted us. "Pull up chairs and make yourselves at home! What can I do for you?"

I explained we were looking for cargo for the *Yongmin*, preferably something that would not take the ship too far from Malaya.

Mr. Yee lounged back in his swivel chair, hooked his thumbs in his suspenders, shifted his cigar around in his pursed lips, and nodded thoughtfully. He was very fat. A diamond sparkled on the sausage-like little finger of his left hand, and a broad gold watchband encircled his plump wrist. His coal-black hair was parted in the middle and slicked down with pomade, the scent of which I could smell across the desk.

"Well," he finally decided, "let's see, now. I might be able to get you some charter work, carrying cargo to Sumatra. How does that sound?"

"Fine," I said. "Will you check on it?"

"Sure will. Now, how about some lunch, fellas?" Mr. Yee didn't wait for an answer. He stood up and pulled on a shark-skin jacket. "Come on. I'll take you to Frenchy's. Great steaks there."

I didn't know whether I wanted Mr. Yee's company or not. He seemed too modern a Chinese to me—too unlike my old-fashioned friend Mah Fong. Still, as we drove through the dense traffic along Collier's Quay in Mr. Yee's chauffeur-driven Oldsmobile, I couldn't help but like the voluble, over-stuffed, up-to-date Oriental.

"Any friend of Mah Fong's a friend of mine!" he stated firmly. "Anything you fellas want, you just let ol' Yee know! Liquor, girls, anything!"

I was about to ask him about the Sultan of Singapore, but Gus spoke first. "Say, where can we meet some nice girls?"

Mr. Yee shook with laughter. "Now, you don't mean nice

girls, Gus!" He dug his elbow into Gus's ribs. "I know what you mean, and you just leave it to ol' Yee! Let me tell you about our Singapore gals!"

He told us—at length. While Gus was closely listening, I looked out the windows. Around us surged a vivid, constantly changing mass of machinery and humanity. Taxis and motor-cars mingled with rickshaws and bicycles. Malay policemen directed traffic with a pair of white boards attached to their shoulders like wings. On one side of us a high-wheeled cart creaked, drawn by a pair of white oxen. On the other side an old Chinese jogged along, two pots of steaming curry suspended from a bamboo pole balanced across his shoulders.

The sidewalks were even more colorful. Chinese girls in silken *cheongsams* walked side by side with Malays in sarongs. Indian women in *saris* mingled with Europeans in short-skirted linen dresses. European businessmen and servicemen, in a variety of tropical suits and uniforms, shuttled among the national costumes of a dozen Oriental nations.

Singapore, I thought, is the most cosmopolitan city in the world. And one of the most strategic. Built on an island, it is linked to the southernmost tip of the Malayan peninsula by a causeway. Its fine port forms a kind of funnel, through which flow the riches of Malaya. Whoever controls Singapore controls Malaya—and other vital areas of Southeast Asia. Perhaps that is why, when the British gave Malaya her independence a few years ago, she retained certain military rights over the Crown Colony of Singapore.

We were now driving out Orchard Road, which was lined with open-fronted Chinese shops and overhung by the fiery blossoms of tall Flame-of-the-Forest trees. Frenchy's Restaurant was located near the fashionable Tanglin district. As we went in, the proprietor greeted us effusively. He was a tall, suave Frenchman and obviously knew Mr. Yee very well, for they joked and kidded as we were seated.

The restaurant was crowded with well-to-do Europeans and Chinese. I could hear half a dozen languages as I looked around. And then suddenly, across the room, I noticed a young woman who immediately caught my attention. I have always looked for the best in women, as well as gems, and this girl had the lively, flawless quality of a first-class jewel. She was slender and blonde, and her hair was cut in the perky "boyish bob" that was then fashionable. From her

vivacious gestures, although I couldn't hear her voice, I knew she was French. She had a warm, gay personality that spread beyond the table at which she sat. People at surrounding tables smiled at her, as though charmed, and other people kept stopping by to chat with her. I wondered who she was.

"What will you have, Richard?" asked Mr. Yee, and I had to turn back to my own table to give my order. When I looked around later, the vivacious blonde had gone. I felt vaguely disappointed.

After lunch Mr. Yee asked if he could drive Gus and me anywhere. I said I'd like to see the Sultan of Singapore.

"Sultan Ibrahim?" said Yee, looking a little puzzled. "What do you want to see him for?"

"It's a private matter," I explained. "I'm searching for a certain gem, and I understand the sultan might be able to help me."

"I doubt it," said Yee. "Ol' Ibrahim is a nice enough fella, but he's nobody. He ain't got nothin'."

I saw what Yee meant when we arrived at the sultan's "palace." This was a run-down old frame house near the waterfront. Children and chickens stirred up the only activity in the yard. A group of women squatted on the veranda, gossiping, and four or five Malays lay sleeping in the shade of some banana trees.

I involuntarily voiced my surprise. "This is where the sultan lives?"

Yee laughed. "Well, ol' Ibrahim's a sultan pretty much in name only. He has no status as a ruler. The British didn't let his ancestors retain the privileges of the royal houses on the mainland. Even way back then, the British realized they'd need complete control of a place as important as Singapore. So they stripped the local sultan of all his powers and put him on a pension. It amounted to a good income in those days, I guess, but it's practically nothing now. Ol' Ibrahim can't get along on it and support all his poor royal relatives. He has to operate a small fleet of *prahus*—Malay sailing ships." Yee laughed again. "One thing about ol' Ibrahim—you don't have to worry about royal protocol with him. Just go right on in."

As Gus and I crossed the yard, the women on the veranda scuttled from sight. An aged Malay in a white *songkok*—a sign that he had made the holy pilgrimage to Mecca—met us at the door. When I explained that we wished to see the sul-

tan, the old Malay bowed and led us into a small waiting room. Framed verses from the Koran hung on the mildewed walls, and a bare electric bulb hung from the cracked ceiling.

Sultan Ibrahim, when he appeared, had an air of nobility despite his faded sarong and slight build. His features were strongly carved and his dark eyes had a level, confident gaze. A gold earring hung from his left ear. A *kris*—the ceremonial Malayan dagger—was plunged into the waistband of his sarong.

"I bring greetings from Prince Mamoud of Trengganu," I said, bowing and handing over to the sultan my letter of introduction.

He read the letter, returned my bow, and said, "I thank you for the courtesy of your visit. I shall be pleased to help you in any way I can." He indicated some rattan chairs around a table. "Please be seated."

Women were already padding in and out of the room, burdening the table with fruit, *satay*, cakes, and various drinks. After we had sat down, I came right to the point. "I am interested in finding a stone known as a fire pearl. Have you ever heard of it?"

The sultan nodded. "I have indeed. In Malay it is known as the *Kumbalageni*, the most sacred and powerful gem in the Orient."

"Have you ever seen one?"

The sultan smiled ironically. "No, but for a quirk of fate I would today own one—and rule over an empire extending from Siam to Bali."

"I don't understand," I said.

"I shall explain. The fire pearl has been linked with the destiny of Malaya for thousands of years. There are many legends about the stone, but I shall confine myself to history. Sixteen centuries ago an ancestor of mine named Prince Pulavarman came into possession of a fire pearl. His power and fortune immediately expanded, and eventually he ruled over an empire covering Malaya, Java, and the islands beyond. This was known as the Empire of Srivijaya, which our imperial dynasty ruled for nearly a thousand years. Then the fire pearl disappeared, and the empire disintegrated."

"What happened to the stone?" I asked.

"It is not known for certain. Malay history is sketchy and often uncertain. The gem is variously stated to have been

stolen, lost, or lured from the emperor by a woman of unholy charm. My guess is that it was stolen by a rival sultan."

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, four hundred years ago the Sultan of Malacca was at the peak of his power. He was a boastful man, and it eventually became known that he possessed a fire pearl—probably the one stolen from my ancestor. History soon repeated itself. A jealous court official stole the magic gem from the sultan and sold it to Don Alfonso d'Albuquerque, a Portuguese admiral. Albuquerque promptly conquered Malacca and became one of the first great European influences in this part of the world. On his death, so the story goes, the fire pearl was spirited away by still another Malay sultan."

"Do you know which one?" I asked.

Ibrahim shook his head. "No—the sacred gem might rest today in any of the royal houses of Malaya. A ruler who possessed it would not be likely to advertise the fact. These stones, as you can see, have a long history of being stolen."

Ibrahim paused to sip his orange juice. I should have politely waited to ask my next question, but I was too impatient. "Have you ever heard of any other fire pearls?"

The sultan nodded. "Yes. There was one owned by a potentate in Java a scant few hundred years ago. It was sold for a fabulous sum to Sir Stamford Raffles, the British founder of Singapore, who became the most powerful European of his time in this area. Then Raffles somehow lost possession of the stone, and his career rapidly declined. The fire pearl was returned to one of the ruling houses of Java—which one I am not sure."

"Then," I said, summing up, "one of these two fire pearls is today probably somewhere in Malaya, the other in Java."

Again the sultan nodded. "That is correct."

I felt excited. I was getting closer and closer to my goal. The trouble was, it was a twin goal—Malaya and Java—and I didn't know which way to turn first.

The sultan noticed my indecision. He smiled and said, "You seem most interested in finding a fire pearl. May I ask why?"

"I really don't know," I admitted. "Every man develops a deep desire—perhaps an aim in life. Mine just happens to be to find a fire pearl."

Ibrahim shook his head sympathetically. "You have indeed chosen to follow a dim and difficult path—and, I might warn

you, a most dangerous one." He glanced at Gus. "Do you also seek a fire pearl?"

Gus grinned. "No, I chase women. That can be pretty dangerous, too."

The sultan chuckled. I had to smile myself, but I quickly brought the conversation back to a serious level. "Sultan Ibrahim, have you any idea where or when the first fire pearls were discovered?"

"Not exactly. We only know that it was between two and three thousand years ago. There could not have been more than a handful of the stones, and they would appear to have been found somewhere in Malaya or the islands to the south."

This checked with my own extensive research. My excitement mounted. "Do you suppose there are more to be found?"

The sultan shrugged. "Who knows? If they lie hidden in the jungles of Malaya, they may never be found. There are parts of the peninsula that wild animals can hardly penetrate, let alone humans."

"Nevertheless," I said, "I'd like to try. Would it be difficult or expensive to organize an expedition?"

"Why do it yourself? I understand that Raffles Museum is organizing an expedition into the interior. Perhaps you can go along."

I could hardly hold my excitement now. "Where can I find out?"

"I shall be glad to make inquiries for you. Several of the scientists at the museum are friends of mine."

"Will you call me at Raffles Hotel when you know?"

"Of course. You will hear from me soon."

I thanked Ibrahim, and Gus and I got up to leave. At the doorway we stood for a moment looking out at the sun-washed yard. The sultan's children—some naked, some in ragged shorts—were playing hide-and-seek. The royal "courtiers" still lay asleep in the shade of the banana trees. The women were gossiping again.

"Just think," said Ibrahim, "if my forefathers had not lost their fire pearl, I would be a mighty emperor today instead of a poor sea trader."

I looked at him. He had spoken wryly, but his eyes had a serious gaze.

"I think you really believe that," I said.

"I do."

I held out my hand to him. "So do I."

CHAPTER IX

There is no twilight in the tropics. One minute it is day, the next night. And yet there is a subtle transformation in which earth and sky seem to change places. As the sun goes down, its gaudy rays sweep upward, splashing the evening clouds with scarlet, gold, purple, and mauve. These spectacular colors burn themselves out with their very intensity, and as they fade, a velvety dusk rises from the earth. It extends only to treetop level, and from there the satiny blue sheen of the sky persists—strengthened at times by a hot, full moon.

I stood on the veranda of my room at Raffles Hotel and watched such a moon swell in the sky. I had been watching the magical transformation of day into night, and I had made a great scientific discovery. In the tropics night doesn't fall. It rises, burgeoning darkly from the rich, warm earth.

My scientific studies were interrupted by Gus. "Come on, Richard. Mr. Yee is waiting."

I pulled on a lightweight jacket and followed Gus down to the lounge. Mr. Yee, dressed in a snappy white dinner coat, was sitting at a table among the potted plants. His hair was slicker than ever, and I could actually see the reflection of the overhead fans whirling on its shiny black surface.

"Hi, fellas!" he greeted us. "Ready for a big night?"

We were—or at least Gus was ready enough for both of us. After a few drinks we had dinner, then took a taxi out to the "New World." This was a kind of Oriental Coney Island—noisy, crowded, and lurid in the white glare of hissing gas lanterns. There was something for everyone: Malay shadow shows, Indian belly dancers, Chinese operas, Javanese sword dancers, Burmese snake charmers, Siamese bell ringers, and American-style stripteases (performed by plump Chinese girls who kept bursting into giggles over their own erotic antics).

Bands blared everywhere, and pitchmen shrieked their wares, selling everything from Oriental herbs to French postcards. One persistent little peddler, a Chinese kid who

couldn't have been more than ten years old, followed me about, trying to sell me a shrunken head.

"Real thing, *tuan*," the kid kept assuring me, holding up the miniature monstrosity by its long hair and trying to force it on me. "Straight from Borneo!"

I had to pay him blackmail to get rid of him. A few minutes later another kid latched onto me. This one was only about eight years old, a little angel with an evil grin.

"Rubbers, *tuan*?" he leered, exhibiting a carton of contraceptives. "Don't take any chances—some of these girls are dosed to the eyebrows."

Mr. Yee sent the kid skedaddling, then solemnly told me, "Don't believe him. Singapore girls are clean." He shifted his cigar and added, "Except those who go with sailors, of course."

I refrained from asking if there were any who didn't go with sailors. Anyway, we soon met the girls—hundreds of them, brightly dressed like night-blooming flowers. They sat or stood about a big, dimly lighted dance hall that was attached to the park. The girls were taxi dancers—with an Oriental difference. They could be hired for a dance or "booked out" by the hour or night. A rare few restricted their activities to dancing, drinking, or party-going, but the majority were willing to go anywhere or do anything their patron wished.

Mr. Yee, it soon became obvious, was an old and valued patron. As soon as we sat down, our table was surrounded by enthusiastic females. There were Malays in provocatively cut sarongs, Chinese in sheath dresses slit up the sides to the hips, Indians in sinuously draped *saris*, Javanese in peek-a-boo lace gowns, and Eurasians in the tight-fitting, knee-exposing "flapper" skirts then fashionable in the Western world.

"Take your pick, fellas!" Mr. Yee laughed, gesturing magnanimously.

Gus was like a kid suddenly confronted with a showcase full of candy. He could hardly make up his mind, but finally decided on a beautiful Eurasian. She had a friend, it turned out, and, rather than break up the set, I agreed to accept the companion.

As is usual in such cases, I got the horrible one. Her name was Consuela. She was quiet enough while sitting at the table, but whenever we got up to dance, she put on a sham passionate performance reminiscent of an old-time movie queen.

She would press herself against me, lower her eyelids seductively, and bare her teeth in what was supposed to be an alluring smile. Then, the moment the music stopped, she would switch off the passion, eye me calculatingly, and demand, "You like, big boy?"

Her conversation consisted of two other questions: "You come with me, big boy?" and "How much you pay?"

I found her funny at first, then it all became tiresome. The place was too hot and crowded. Cigarette smoke clouded the stale air, and drunks of all kinds kept bumping into me: sailors, soldiers, Chinese "sports" like Yee, and flush-faced Europeans.

Finally, when Consuela began to smell more like sweat than perfume, I made an excuse and left. I'm sure no one missed me. A number of Chinese and British friends of Yee had joined the table, along with more girls, and the party was going great.

I walked back to Raffles, enjoying the moonlit night. When I went into the hotel, it was not quite midnight, and a floor show was going on in the ballroom. The audience, mostly made up of Europeans in evening dress, was politely applauding a dance act that had just finished. I found a vacant table and was served a drink.

When I looked around again, a slender girl in a simple but smart gown had stepped into the spotlight. I nearly dropped my drink. It was the blonde who had attracted my attention in Frenchy's Restaurant.

She started to sing. Her voice was pleasant—it had a warm, smoky sort of quality—but it was her piquant personality that entranced her audience—and me. One moment she was a gamin, the next a grand lady. Her verve and style carried the audience along with her, utterly charmed.

Between numbers, while the audience was loudly applauding, I called the waiter over.

"What is the singer's name?" I asked.

"Miss Blanche Delagneau, sir."

"Has she been here long?"

"About a month, sir. She is very popular."

This was an understatement. The audience would hardly let the girl go. Laughingly, she finally had to plead exhaustion. She blew kisses, waved and bowed her way off the floor. A little later, I noticed, she returned and joined a party sitting near the orchestra stand.

I sat watching the girl, still captivated by her smiles and gestures. For once, I wished I were like Gus. I would get up, walk over to Blanche Delagneau, bow, kiss her hand, and murmur, "Mademoiselle, you are marvelous." She would rise, move into my arms, and we would dance. Then—

I smiled to myself, amused by my own fantasies. I finished my drink, went up to my room, crawled into bed, and fell asleep. My dreams had a new dimension: Blanche Delagneau was in them as well as the *Agni Mani*.

A piercing scream woke me. Automatically I leaped out of bed, lunged across the floor, and snapped on the light. There was no one in the room.

Again the scream sounded. It came from somewhere in the corridor. I yanked open the door and rushed out. Other doors were opening up and down the corridor, but I was the first out. A grotesque dark figure was scuttling toward me. Crouched low in the dim light, it could have been man, beast, or monstrous insect.

"Watch out!" a woman shrieked. "He has a knife!"

The figure was nearly to me now, running in zigzag fashion. The corridor was narrow, and I held out my arms, trying to block as much of it as possible. The figure feinted to my left, then the right, and I jumped back and forth.

I could see what it was now—a Chinese, naked except for tight-fitting shorts and a rubber cap, his body entirely covered with grease. When I made a grab for him, he slipped through my arms like an eel, leaving my hands and pajamas smeared with grease. I made another grab, but too late. The oily figure squirted past me and ran down the hall.

There followed one of the most ludicrous sights I have ever seen. By now more than a score of men and women had rushed into the corridor. They all tried to grab the glistening intruder, but no one could hold him. He slipped, squeezed, writhed, wriggled, and squirted his way through the entire gantlet. In the confusion of cries and shouts, a big Sikh watchman finally cornered the slippery Chinese at the end of the corridor and laid him low with an overhand blow on the head.

I found I was laughing. There was a woman standing beside me, also laughing.

"My God!" she said in French. "Did you ever see anything so funny!"

It was Blanche Delagneau, her silk pajamas stained with

grease. Her hair was tousled, and she looked as exhilarated as a child.

"Did you try to grab him?" I asked.

"Sure! He squeezed into my room through the bars over the windows. My God, can you imagine! I woke up, and I saw this shadow coming through the bars! My God, I thought I was dreaming!" She took a good look at me. "You are a very brave or very foolish man, monsieur. Did you not hear me call that the Chinese was carrying a knife?"

"What about yourself?" I countered. "You tried to grab him."

"Ah, yes, but I didn't know at that time he had a knife. I only saw it when I turned on the lights and he ran out of my room." Concerned, the girl took my greasy hands and inspected them. "Let's see if you are cut. No, I guess not." She grinned impishly at me. "The devil protects fools like us, monsieur."

I could only smile at her. There was a crowd of people around us now, milling about and excitedly chattering. The hotel manager, a Swiss in a flamboyant dressing gown, was trying to restore order.

"Ladies and gentlemen, everything is quite all right. Please return to your rooms. The burglar has been taken away by the police. He stole nothing, and no one has been hurt."

"What about my feelings?" called out Blanche, and the crowd laughed. She had a gift for spreading immediate cheer. As the others drifted back to their rooms, she held up one hand. "Look, it's trembling! Maybe I wasn't joking about my feelings."

"You need a drink," I said. "My friend has some Scotch in his room and I don't believe he's in. Shall we see?"

She promptly became a sparkling-eyed little conspirator. "Let's!"

I knocked on Gus's door. There was no answer, and I looked inside. The room was deserted, and the bed hadn't been slept in. Gus's bottle of Scotch stood on the table, complete with glasses and ice case.

"Ah," said Blanche, "just what the doctor ordered."

She had followed me into the room.

"I'll leave the door open," I said, making clear my honorable intentions, but she smiled and closed it.

"I am sure you are a gentleman, monsieur. Besides, as you will recall, I can scream very loud."

I laughed, washed the grease off my hands, and mixed the drinks. The ice had nearly all melted, but there was enough to cool the Scotch. Blanche and I sat at the table, sipping our drinks and laughing about the wild events in the hallway.

Then, gradually, seriously, we began telling each other about ourselves. Blanche was from Paris. Her mother had been an actress, her father a well-to-do businessman. The stage had been strongly in Blanche's blood, and after finishing school, she had started her career as a singer. She had done quite well—at one time she had starred at the famed Moulin Rouge—but she had been restless. She felt she wanted to see the world, and finally an agent had booked an international tour for her. Her engagement at Raffles had been for only two weeks but she had proved so popular and she had enjoyed Singapore so much that she had stayed on.

When she had finished telling me all this, I said, "You're very much like I am, Blanche. You're searching for something. Do you know what?"

She gave a characteristic little shrug. "Love, probably. Isn't that what most women seek?"

"You're not most women, Blanche." Tenderly I placed my hand over hers. "You're very special. . . ."

For a moment there was a wonderful feeling of affinity between us. A kind of sweet, strong bond drew us closer and closer together. . . .

Then the door burst open and Gus staggered in. The sight of a beautiful blonde sitting in his room with me popped his eyes wide open. He stared at our greasy pajamas, then gasped, "Richard! Lady! What have you been doing!"

Blanche laughed and got up. "I'd better go. I'll meet your friend when he's sober."

"Yes. Will you have lunch with me, Blanche?"

"I'd love to, Richard. Good night."

After she had gone, Gus kept drunkenly demanding, "Who was that gorgeous creature? And how did you get her in here, Richard?"

There was no use trying to explain what had happened. I could hardly believe it myself. I got Gus out of his clothes and into bed, then went off to my own room.

I had lunch with Blanche, then afterward we went for a

drive. She was just as delightful in daylight as evening. By the time we returned to Raffles, it was as though we had known each other all our lives.

Before we parted to go to our rooms, Blanche placed her hand on my arm and said in her refreshing, forthright way, "It has been a wonderful day, Richard, but not long enough. May I have dinner with you?"

I pretended to ponder the matter. "Only if I can sit with you in the ballroom between shows."

"It's a bargain!"

But I was not to have Blanche to myself. Her myriad admirers soon clustered around our table in the ballroom, and even Gus managed to squeeze himself in.

"Then it wasn't a dream I had last night," he said to Blanche when I introduced them. "You are real—and more beautiful than any dream."

Blanche accepted the elaborate compliment with a laugh, but Gus, I could see, was serious. When Blanche got up to sing, he told me, "There's a girl who could change my whole life. I would gladly give up all other women for her."

"I saw her first," I reminded him.

"But all is fair in love and war, Richard"—Gus's eyes turned almost dreamy—"and, for me, this is love. . . ."

I wasn't worried. Blanche sat beside me, and although she was charming to everyone, her smiles for me seemed to have special meaning. There was a heady, happy promise of love between us.

About ten o'clock I was called to the telephone. I was surprised to hear Sultan Ibrahim on the other end of the line.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Baron," he apologized, "but time is short. Are you still interested in joining the Raffles Museum expedition into the interior?"

"I most certainly am. Why?"

"Because I have spoken about you to Dr. Collings, the leader of the expedition, and he would like to meet you."

"Fine!" I said. "Where? When?"

"Dr. Collings is with me now. He can be at your hotel within half an hour."

"Please send him along."

Dr. H. D. Collings, I knew, was assistant curator at Raffles Museum. When he arrived at the hotel, I found him to be a calm, good-natured, pipe-smoking Englishman with a quiet curiosity about everyone and everything. We sat at a table

among the potted plants, and before I realized it, he had gently extracted from me the story of my search for the *Agni Mani*.

Dr. Collings then took his pipe out of his mouth and said, "I must congratulate you, Baron—particularly on your enthusiasm about your subject and your tenacity of purpose. I shall be glad to help you in any way I can."

"Just let me go along on your expedition," I told him. "I promise not to be any bother, and I'll willingly pay any expenses incurred."

Dr. Collings gestured with his pipe. "Oh, that can be worked out. You should know, however, that we're going into some of the wildest jungle in the world. There'll be hard work involved. We intend to excavate at a site where we believe a prehistoric settlement once existed."

My imagination was immediately seized. "Fire pearls might well have been first discovered at just such a site!"

The scientist nodded. "It's entirely possible."

"Then you must let me go along with you!"

Dr. Collings smiled. "Suppose you come around to the museum tomorrow morning and talk to the curator, Dr. Chasen. He's a good chap—I'm sure he'll give you permission to accompany the expedition. As far as I'm concerned, I shall be glad to have you along. There's only one thing."

"What's that?"

"I shall be leaving for the interior the day after tomorrow. Can you make it?"

"Nothing could stop me!"

At that moment Blanche danced by in the arms of Gus. She looked at me over his shoulder, somewhat quizzically, perhaps a little hurt. With a pang I realized it had been more than an hour since I had excused myself to talk to Dr. Collings.

It was another half hour before the scientist left and I finally got back to Blanche. I tried to tell her about the *Agni Mani* and how important it was to me to find one. Yet the more I talked, the more the stone seemed to rise as a barrier between us. With the perversity that the female sex is sometimes capable of, Blanche seemed to think I had made a choice between her and a stone that might or might not exist. What so shortly before had been a promise of love now turned to petty annoyance. When Blanche began to flirt outrageously

with Gus—or, at least, so it seemed to me—I brusquely excused myself, went up to my room, and began to pack.

In the morning I went to Raffles Museum and met Dr. F. H. Chasen. The curator, a distinguished scholar and authority on Malaysian archaeology, readily gave permission for me to accompany Dr. Collings's expedition. I spent the rest of the day arranging matters so that I might leave. Mr. Yee had obtained a charter contract for the *Yongmin* to carry cargo between Singapore and Sumatra, and Lagendijk and McRae were entirely capable of handling the ship. Gus was only too delighted to stay in Singapore and look after the paper work.

"Of course you realize," he warned me, "I shall do all I can to steal Blanche from you."

"You can't steal something from me that I never really had," I told him.

I still felt annoyed with Blanche, and I guess she felt the same about me. Anyway, she wasn't at the railroad station when Dr. Collings and I pulled out for the long journey into the sweltering interior of Malaya.

CHAPTER X

We left the train at Kuala Kangsar, a small town in the state of Perak. Supplies and equipment for the expedition had been assembled at the Kota Tampan rubber estate, about ten miles out of town. Dr. Collings spent several days carefully checking the equipment and arranging for further supplies to be sent to the excavation site.

Then, early one morning, we set out on the slow trek through the jungle. The first few miles were comparatively easy. Dr. Collings and I rode on a pony cart piled high with equipment. A professional Chinese hunter, carrying a shotgun, went ahead of us. We were followed by a long line of Tamil laborers—wiry little black men from the south of India.

The jungle soon became too tangled for the pony cart. It was unloaded and sent back to the rubber estate, and the equipment and supplies were shifted to the shoulders of the Tamils. I didn't know how those near-naked, barefooted little

blacks could stand their heavy burdens, let alone chatter and laugh as we pushed through the steamy wilderness.

I had started out wearing a sun helmet. It soon came off, for there was no sun in the dank, dark depths of the jungle. The towering trees, with their wide-spreading branches, blotted out the sky. The very air seemed to have been shut out, and in the sticky heat I was drenched in sweat. It poured from my brow and blurred my vision. At times we seemed to be pressing into a wavering, watery green world on the bed of an ocean.

We must have been following a trail of some kind, but I couldn't see it. I blindly stumbled along behind Dr. Collings, plunging through the choked underbrush as best I could. Giant ferns and prickly bushes clawed at us, and decayed vegetation crunched beneath our boots. Disturbed insects angrily swarmed about us.

By now my breath was rasping in my throat. I glanced over my shoulder and once again marveled at the stamina and cheery spirits of the Tamils. One gave me a big wink, flashing a mouthful of strong white teeth.

"What makes these fellows so happy?" I called to Dr. Collings.

"They're getting paid twice as much as they make at their regular trade, tapping rubber."

Since life is a matter of such relative values, I turned my thoughts to the *Agni Mani* I might find. This, or my second wind, quickly had me feeling better, and I began to notice the exotic beauties of the jungle around us. Wild orchids grew like splendid weeds. Gaily plumaged birds swooped through the greenery, crying out in a variety of calls. Butterflies as large as handkerchiefs fluttered around a flowering bush. Their reddish wings were decorated with black and white designs.

Dr. Collings, as usual, was ready with scientific information. He pointed with his pipe and said, "Coconut butterflies—the largest specie in Asia. Beautiful, aren't they?"

Before I could reply, the Chinese hunter ahead shouted, "Ular! Ular!" ("Snake! Snake!")

I was carried forward by the eager rush of the Tamils, who were all jabbering excitedly and pointing between some bushes. There lay a reptile of unbelievable proportions, at least 28 feet long and with the girth of a large log. Its middle was lumpily distended.

"Python," observed Dr. Collings. "Harmless at the moment. It's just swallowed a meal, probably a wild pig, and is too sluggish to do anything." He shifted his pipe and added, as though making a remark about the weather, "By the way, Richard, if a python should ever get hold of you, keep it away from trees. Once a python gets its tail anchored on a tree, it can crush a cow to death."

I inquired, a little weakly, "How do I stay away from trees in the jungle?"

But the scientist's mind was above such minor details. "Remarkable creature, the python," he went on. "His digestive juices are like acid. Can break down the flesh and bones of the toughest of animals. The python's jawbones have amazing flexibility, too. Once saw a python that had actually swallowed a small tiger."

Mention of tigers made me look around uneasily. Dr. Collings smiled and pointed his pipe overhead at a band of gibbering monkeys which had been following us. "As long as those little fellows are frolicking about, you don't need to worry about tigers. When the monkeys vanish, that's the time to take care. A tiger is usually near."

That evening, after we had made camp beside a stream, Dr. Collings brought the subject up again. "Would you like to see a tiger, Richard?"

"Only from a distance," I said.

"There's nothing to worry about. Come on."

Carrying a shotgun—for in the dense jungle a single-charged rifle is often useless for quick firing—the scientist led me upstream. He scouted the muddy shore, then indicated a nearby tree. "There's our observation tower."

We climbed the tree and settled ourselves on a branch overlooking the stream. I started to talk, but Dr. Collings held one finger to his lips. We sat there, not saying a word, until the colorful sunset had faded away and the quick darkness swelled up from the earth. There was a momentary hush, while the creatures of the day retired and the creatures of the night came out. Then the jungle cacophony began again. Moonlight dappled the darkness beneath us with strange patterns of light and shadow.

Dr. Collings finally touched my shoulder. I looked to where he was pointing with his unlighted pipe. At first I could see only a creamy crisscross that looked like leaves in the moonlight. As I strained my eyes, however, the pattern

seemed to stir. A moment later I was staring at a magnificent Malayan tiger, standing in full view on the bank of the stream.

The huge beast looked upstream, then down, then glanced back over his shoulder. At this signal a tigress came out of the undergrowth and, while her mate stood guard, drank from the stream.

Again Dr. Collings touched my shoulder. He was pointing downstream. I almost gasped when I saw the sleek, ominous dark outline of a black panther, its slanting yellow eyes glittering.

"This is a favorite watering place—" Dr. Collings started to whisper, then broke off and said in his normal voice, "Oh, hell, there they go!" The whisper had been enough to send the tigers and the panther leaping back into the jungle. "Sorry, Richard. If I had kept my big mouth shut, you'd have seen a gathering of just about every wild animal around here. Most of them are night prowlers. They wisely lie still during the heat of the day, then do their roaming and hunting at night."

Dr. Collings snapped on his flashlight and, in the strong beam, started to descend the tree. A little nervously, I called after him, "What about those tigers down there?"

"They're a mile away from here by now."

Nevertheless, as we returned to camp, I kept glancing apprehensively into the menacing dark jungle.

"Tigers rarely attack humans," Dr. Collings tried to assure me. "They prefer their customary jungle prey—deer, boar, monkeys, and so forth. It's only when a tiger is injured or grows too old to hunt his normal prey that he turns to slower-moving humans. That's when he becomes a man-eater."

"So if I meet a tiger," I said wryly, "all I have to do is check his age and general state of health. Oh, yes—and keep any pythons who may have become attached to me away from trees."

Dr. Collings chuckled. "There's just one more thing, Richard. Whenever you hear a wild boar, get *up* a tree just as fast as you can. The wild boar is the real killer of the Malayan jungle. He can zip out of the underbrush, chop a man down with his tusks, castrate him, slash him to ribbons or gore him to death in a matter of seconds."

I saw my first wild boar the next afternoon. We were filing

across a grassy clearing when the Chinese hunter suddenly fired his shotgun. For a moment I couldn't see what he was shooting at. Then a bristly, evil-looking beast flashed across a corner of the clearing. The Tamils began to shout, and the beast, as though enraged by the cries, abruptly wheeled and charged toward us.

Everybody but myself broke and ran for the trees. I stood stock-still, almost hypnotized by the glinting, wicked little eyes of the animal rushing toward me. I could see him in horrifying detail. He was about three feet tall. His long snout was lowered almost to the ground, and from each side a sharp tusk hooked upward. He ran, or rather scuttled, with the sinister, terrifying mobility of a rat.

Suddenly there was another blast from the hunter's gun. The boar, hit with the full force of the heavy charge, seemed to flip into the air. He turned a half somersault, came down on his back, and skidded toward me, carried along by his own momentum. When he finally came to rest, I stared down at his pale, obscene underside. His eyes were still open, still glaring at me with vicious hatred.

Dr. Collings came up beside me and said with mild reproof, "This, Richard, is a wild boar. This is the one you get *up* a tree from. The python is the one you get away from a tree. Do try to keep that clear in your mind, Richard."

I grinned weakly and nodded. Dr. Collings then added his usual scientific tidbit of information. "The wild boar is tough and wiry, but very good to eat. The meat is rich and tasty."

That proved very true. We reached the excavation site late that afternoon and had the wild boar for dinner. I ate with relish. I was not only learning how to survive in the jungle—I was thoroughly enjoying it.

The excavation site was near the Perak River, a sluggish brown stream that writhed through the jungle like an enormous reptile. Preliminary diggings had already been made, and these disclosed the outlines of a small prehistoric settlement. I wanted to get down there at once with a pick and shovel and start mining for an *Agni Mani*, but Dr. Collings stopped me.

"We're working to a careful plan," he explained. "There are objects of tremendous historic value hidden here, and we must uncover them with caution. We don't want any of them smashed. You do understand, don't you, Richard?"

I understood—and kept out of the way of the diggers. I had to content myself with sorting over the dirt and debris that was cleaned from the site. There were bones and rocks of all kinds, but nothing that looked anything like an *Agni Mani*.

Dr. Collings kept me informed of the work in progress. The settlement, he explained, had been preserved by a layer of volcanic ash.

"Now the interesting point," he told me, "is that the nearest volcano, on the island of Sumatra, hasn't erupted in two hundred thousand years. The volcanic ash *must* have drifted across the straits and settled along the Perak River here. Since the village we have uncovered is *beneath* that ash, we know it must be at least two hundred thousand years old. This definitely establishes that a specie of prehistoric man lived in this part of Malaya."

The weapons and tools brought out of the diggings supported Dr. Collings's theory. They were all crudely made of stone. Yet, the way Dr. Collings handled them, one would have thought they were made of the finest platinum. Each find was lovingly inspected and tenderly packed.

"Just think, Richard," the scientist once said to me, reverently regarding a stone knife. "Just think how far back this prehistoric implement goes. It was once used by Paleolithic man."

My enthusiasm over the ancient bits of stone was something less than Dr. Collings's. Paleolithic man, I recalled, had never been noted for his accumulation of gems. I lost interest in the excavation site and, accompanied by the Chinese hunter, began to widen my sphere of search. I probed various jungle trails and explored the banks of the Perak River, both upstream and down.

Once, at a bend in the river, I unexpectedly came face to face with a squat brown figure. At first I thought it was an ape. Then I realized it was a man, short but broad-shouldered, with dark, blunt features. His black hair was long and curly, and he was naked except for a loincloth fashioned of pliable bark. He was carrying a blowpipe made from a hollow length of bamboo.

I don't know which was greater—my surprise or the native's fright. We stared at each other for the briefest fraction of a second, and then he was gone, completely swallowed by the jungle, leaving on the ground behind him only a monkey with a blowpipe dart stuck in its throat. I instinctively felt my own

throat, wondering how close I had come to having my windpipe punctured by a poisoned dart.

When I got back to camp, however, Dr. Collings told me I had been in no danger.

"That was a *Sakai* you met," he explained, "a Malayan aborigine. They're jungle nomads—probably the most primitive and timid people living today. They wander in bands from place to place, setting up crude villages and living by hunting, fishing, and harvesting wild jungle crops. When the food in that area runs out or they're menaced by tigers or elephants, they move on. They're a simple, strangely happy people—despite the fact that they live very much as their Paleolithic ancestors did thousands of years ago. They're really quite friendly once they get to know you. A wandering band must have set up a village near here. We'll try to find it."

This was not difficult. The Chinese hunter reported the next day that the *Sakai* village was less than a mile downstream. When Dr. Collings and I visited the village, however, there was not a soul in sight. The timid aborigines had all fled into the jungle.

"They'll be back," Dr. Collings assured me. "We'll just leave a few tokens of our friendliness."

He then made the rounds of the deserted huts, which were simply made of bamboo and banana leaves and raised on poles above the prowling dangers of the jungle. Each hut had a bamboo platform in front, like a small porch. On every one Dr. Collings left a quantity of salt and some cigarettes.

"The *Sakais* get all their needs from the jungle except salt," the scientist explained to me on the way back to our camp. "They're literally starved for salt and will do almost anything for it, even if it means overcoming their natural fear of strangers."

"What about the cigarettes?" I asked him.

"Well, the *Sakais* are great smokers, even the women and children, but they have only wild jungle tobacco to smoke. A white man's cigarette is a big treat. Unless I miss my guess, we'll soon have some *Sakai* visitors looking for more salt and cigarettes."

He was right. The next day, while we were eating lunch, the Chinese hunter spotted two *Sakais* squatting in the underbrush. Both were grinning broadly and held up their hands to show they were not carrying blowpipes.

"Take them some salt and cigarettes," Dr. Collings instructed me. "That'll make you the fair-haired boy."

The Chinese hunter went along with me. While I handed over the gifts to the aborigines, the hunter spoke to them in their own tongue. It sounded very simple, just a series of animal-like grunts.

"Ask them if I can visit their village," I told the hunter.

He passed on the request to the two *Sakais*, and they bobbed their heads and gestured for me to come along with them. The hunter went, too, but when we reached the village, it again was deserted.

One of our *Sakai* friends then threw back his head and let out a laughing, hyena-like howl. Almost immediately dark heads started popping out of trees and bushes. A minute later I was surrounded by grinning *Sakais*. They were all men, I noticed.

"Are there no women or children?" I asked the Chinese hunter.

He nodded. "They come."

In fact, they came with a rush when I started using my cigarette lighter. The phenomenon of flame leaping from the tips of my fingers had apparently never before been seen by the aborigines. They crowded around me, wide-eyed and murmuring, and it was then I noticed that the women and children had come out of hiding. The kids were plump, brown, and stark naked, most of them puffing on fat cigars made from wild tobacco. The women were bare to the waist, wearing only short sarongs made from the pliable bark of the *Ipoh* tree.

Some of the women were quite attractive. They had smooth complexions, enormous dark eyes, and long, wavy black hair. It was almost impossible to talk to them, however, for they were continually going into gales of laughter or giggles.

The younger women had a startling manner of covering their self-consciousness. When their giggles got out of control, the girls snatched off their sarongs and threw them over their heads, leaving their bodies exposed.

The sarongs, I later learned, were worn primarily for protection against prickly underbrush while pushing through the jungle. The *Sakais*, it seemed, felt none of the civilized world's compulsion to cover their bodies just for covering's sake. More often than not, while squatting around the village,

the aborigines discarded their sarongs and loincloths—the better, it sometimes appeared, to scratch what would otherwise be inaccessible places.

The *Sakais'* manner of living was as simple as their natures. There were no walls or furniture to their huts, which were community affairs, occupied by any number of men, women, and children. The village fires were the community center, not only for cooking but such fundamental matters as childbirth.

I once arrived in the village to find a naked woman squirming on the ground, just delivered of a baby. Another woman was holding the newborn infant over a fire, apparently to kill any germs. The primitive midwife then proceeded to lick the child's body all over. The infant let out a lusty squall, and the mother, quite recovered, sat up and happily held out her arms for her child.

When I expressed amazement over this incident to Dr. Collings, he said, "The *Sakais* have never experienced the comforts of civilized life, so they do not miss them. They're happy and in many respects better off than we are. Daily exposure to dirt and germs immunizes them against diseases. There is no food shortage in the jungle, shelter is easily constructed and clothing hardly required."

"Do they have any spiritual beliefs?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, very strong ones. The *Sakais* are pantheists—nature worshipers. Their gods and goddesses are the sun, the moon, the stars, trees, plants, flowers—everything, in fact, that is beautiful or fruitful. Their evil spirits are symbolized by tigers, panthers, snakes—anything that menaces them."

Later, one night, I had a sample of how the *Sakais* keep evil spirits away. I was awakened by the weirdest conglomeration of moans and howls I had ever heard.

"What's that?" I called to Dr. Collings.

I heard him chuckle as he got out of his cot. "Come on—I'll show you."

Outside our tent, in the darkness, he pointed to a series of bamboo flutes fixed high in a tree. When the wind blew, the flutes moaned and howled.

"The *Sakais* must have placed them up there today," Dr. Collings explained. "You should feel proud, Richard. Your little brown friends obviously care enough to want to keep evil spirits away from you."

I appreciated the tribute, but I deplored the amount of

sleep I lost from then on. There were times, tossing and turning on my cot, when I would gladly have exchanged the moaning flutes for a nice quiet evil spirit.

One night, after dinner, Dr. Collings said, "How about a stroll over to the *Sakai* village, Richard?"

"In the dark?"

"Oh, the path is well marked by now. Besides, I think you'll see something of interest."

"Interest" was hardly the word. As we approached the village, I could hear a curious mixture of sounds. There were grunts, squeals, cries, moans, and shrieks of ecstasy. Then, as we emerged from the dark jungle, I stood stock-still, stunned by the strangest sight I had ever seen. Brightly illuminated by moonlight and the village fires, the naked *Sakais* lay on the exposed platforms of their huts, energetically engaged in the act of communal mating.

I could only stand there, staring, my mouth agape—but Dr. Collings was ever the scientist. He puffed on his pipe and reported matter-of-factly, "The *Sakais* have no sense of sin and consequently are not hindered by sexual inhibitions. They are neither embarrassed nor frustrated by feelings of guilt over what they regard as a completely natural function."

Freud could have learned a lot in that jungle.

The excavation site, which covered only a small area, was entirely cleared out in a few weeks. Dr. Collings had to return to Singapore with his prehistoric treasures, but I was determined to press farther into the jungle. I still felt that somehow, somewhere in that wilderness I would find an *Agni Mani*.

Dr. Collings tried to reason with me. "Richard, trying to find anything in this jungle is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Unless you have definite leads, you're only wasting your time."

"I have plenty of time," I replied. "While I'm here, I might as well make a complete search. If there's an *Agni Mani* in Malaya, I'm going to find it."

Actually, a kind of "jungle fever" had seeped into my blood. Beyond the Perak River, I knew, were primeval areas never before penetrated by a white man. I was irresistibly drawn to these mysterious dark areas, as a diver is sometimes lured into unknown depths of the sea.

The Chinese hunter and two Tamil bearers went with me. I

had promised to pay them double wages. Dr. Collings also turned over to me surplus supplies from his expedition. My tiny exploration party was well equipped when we crossed the Perak River on a raft and plunged into the jungles beyond.

For three months I wandered through a steamy world sealed off from civilization. I struggled through choked, sweltering valleys and climbed mountains where trees grew horizontally from limestone cliffs. Foliage constantly swayed above me, as chattering monkeys and curious apes swung from branch to branch, following our party. Often, as we rested on the banks of streams, elephants would silently lumber into the water. There was a great calm about these behemoths. They were like time itself—interminable.

On one occasion we came onto a desolate swamp that appeared to have been untouched by time. A poisonous mist hung close to the dark ooze, and out of the mist rose the stark, tortured outlines of a few dead trees. Nothing, it seemed, could live in this forgotten world.

Yet, as we worked our way around the scum-covered bog, we saw nightmare creatures that had been incubated in the intense dank heat—a slimy white crocodile, a swarm of pale snakes, a six-foot lizard that stood on its hind legs and walked like a prehistoric monster, dark vultures that floated close overhead on dead wings. It might have been a scene left over from the beginning of time—or a ghostly preview of the end of the world.

Still we pushed on. "Jungle fever" had me firmly in its grip now, drawing me deeper and deeper into this strange lost world, and I barely noticed the hardships I was enduring. Once I woke up to find my body black with ants, my skin burning with the sensation of their bites.

Another time, at night, an electrical storm struck with savage fury. Our flimsy lean-to was blown away, and lightning shattered a tree under which we had sheltered. We were assaulted with timber and branches, yet, astonishingly, none of us was seriously hurt.

Then we ran out of food. We were forced to eat monkeys, "mouse deer," and in a *Sakai* village I once dined with gusto on a delicious steak I later learned had been carved from a python.

By now, I looked like a jungle creature myself. I was gaunt and bearded, and my clothes were in tatters. I recur-

rently sweated and shivered with malaria. Still, if it had been left to me, I would have gone on and on, led to my own destruction by the lure of the jungle. It was the Chinese hunter and two Tamils who realized I had reached the limit of endurance and half-coaxed, half-carried me out of the wilderness to a settlement on the northwest coast of the peninsula.

I spent a week in a Rest House, getting at least some of my health back. Then I wrote to Gus for more money, and after paying off the Chinese hunter and the Tamils and reoutfitting myself, I took the ferry to Penang Island. I wanted to see a Buddhist priest I had heard about, an expert on gems associated with his religion. Among these gems, I knew, was the *Agni Mani*.

I found the priest at the famous Ayer Itam "Snake Temple." This is an elaborate red and green structure with a curved roof of glazed tile. Shaven-headed priests in yellow robes officiate before the altars, on which candles glow and incense smolders.

A stranger, on first entering the temple, is usually impressed by the peaceful atmosphere. Then, as the eyes become accustomed to the dim interior, this first impression is often replaced by horror. Hundreds of "holy snakes" lie on the stone floor, hang from the rafters, slither over the altars, coil about the candlesticks, or cuddle up to the worshipers. Many of these reptiles are poisonous, yet, in the long history of the temple, no one has ever been bitten.

Buddhist devotees claim this proves the theory that "hostility, either between man and man or man and beast, vanishes in a place of peace." There may be another, more scientific explanation: The snakes are stuffed every morning with such delicacies as eggs and consequently are probably left with no desire to sink their fangs into the hands that feed them.

Anyway, in this fantastic setting, I talked with the Buddhist expert on gems. He tried to be helpful, but there was little he could tell me about the *Agni Mani* that I didn't already know. In parting, he pointed to the purple mountains of the mainland and advised me, "There is a dead city up there. In its ruins perhaps you will find what you seek."

I had heard of this "dead city" before. It had been built nearly 2,000 years before by Hindu adventurers who had crossed the Indian Ocean and set up a sea-trading empire

along the Malayan coast and down into the islands of the East Indies.

In Butterworth, on the mainland, I hired a Malay guide and climbed Mount Kedah to the former Hindu capital. There was nothing left but a scattering of ruins, overgrown by the jungle. Nevertheless, for days I clambered over the stones, hauled away debris, and dug beneath what had once been the foundations of magnificent buildings. My Malay guide lay in the shade and looked on as though I had gone mad.

My labors were not entirely in vain. Although I found no *Agni Mani*, I did uncover a strangely inscribed stone slab, a sword, and a jasper ax, the only one of its kind ever found in Malaya. I later presented these finds to Raffles Museum, and they proved of great value in archaeological research.

Broke again, I returned to Penang and wrote to Gus for more money. I half expected him to write back and say there was none left. Instead, he sent along fresh funds and cheerfully reported that everything was fine in Singapore. Most of his letter was devoted to Blanche Delagneau, who, I was surprised to learn, was still singing at Raffles Hotel.

Blanche had been out of my thoughts for months. Now I began to think of her again, nostalgically remembering the promise of love that had once drawn us so close together. Perhaps, I thought, it was not too late to return to Singapore and take up with Blanche where we had left off.

Still, the magnet of the *Agni Mani* was stronger and more immediate. I took a train to the Raub gold mine, which, aside from tin, was the only large deposit of mineral ever uncovered in Malaya. It had occurred to me that an *Agni Mani*, falling from outer space, might have been attracted to the gold.

The British manager of the Raub mine was very helpful. He lent me a car and driver, and I set out to prospect the surrounding mountains. Sweating and excited, I dug up rich quartz, specks of gold and black columnar crystals of tourmaline—but no *Agni Mani*.

Down to my last hunch, I next began a systematic tour of the royal houses of Malaya. I met sultans, potentates, rulers, and courtiers. Most were gracious, many sympathetic, a few surly or suspicious. None owned an *Agni Mani*—or, at least, none would admit to owning an *Agni Mani*. One sultan told me, "If I possessed a fire pearl, I certainly would not let it become common knowledge. There is hardly a potentate in

this part of the world who would not try to buy, beg, borrow, or steal such a magic gem."

Finally, when all my Malayan leads were exhausted and I was down to my last few dollars, I took a train for Singapore. I had been gone eight months. I felt eight years older.

Dispirited, I slumped on the hard wooden bench of a crowded third-class carriage. It was night, and the windows were all open, allowing the warm breeze to blow through. Behind me, a Malay stroked a guitar and began to sing. Suddenly the silvery notes seemed to be the very stars overhead—not buried by darkness, but bright and clear and twinkling *because* of the gloom.

I listened to the words of the Malay song, as old as the race itself:

*Brapa tinggi puchok pisang,
Tinggi lagi asap api.
Brapa tinggi gunung me-lentang,
Tinggi lagi harap hati.*

(However high the stem of the banana,
The smoke of fire goes higher still.
However high the mountain range,
My heart's desire is higher still.)

In other words, the human spirit transcends all. I sat up, feeling much better. I wasn't licked yet.

CHAPTER XI

In Singapore I found Gus looking healthy, happy, and highly pleased with himself.

"I'm a changed man," he proudly told me. "I haven't been drunk in months."

This sobriety was reflected in the *Yongmin's* accounts. Everything was in order, and we had an encouraging balance in our bank account.

"What brought this miracle about?" I asked Gus.

"Love, old pal! I'm going to get married!"

I had a sinking feeling. I knew who the girl was even before I asked. "Blanche?"

"Of course! Who else?"

Blanche was still singing at Raffles Hotel. She apparently could have made a life's career out of this one job. When we met, she greeted me warmly, kissed me on the cheek, and clasped my hands. "I'm so glad to see you again, Richard! We worried about you." Her eyes searched mine. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No," I said. "Did you?"

She knew what I meant. She hesitated a moment, then said, "I'm not sure, Richard. That's why I stayed on in Singapore—to make sure."

I felt a mixture of hope and bitterness. She could have meant she had waited for me to come back—or she could have meant she was not sure about Gus.

"For a woman who's about to get married," I said, "you seem strangely uncertain."

Blanche looked genuinely puzzled. "Uncertain?"

"About the man you're going to marry—Gus."

Blanche made a characteristic gesture, half in amusement, half in annoyance. "Did Gus tell you that?"

"He did."

"Well, he's getting ahead of himself. I'm very fond of Gus—I may even love him—but I'm not sure of him—or of myself. I said I might marry him if he proves to me he can stay sober and stop chasing women and if I prove to myself that I truly love him. That's the way the situation stands now."

My hope grew—there was still a chance for me!—but my elation was short-lived. If I won Blanche, I would almost certainly lose Gus. Not only would the friendship of a lifetime be broken, but Gus, never very stable emotionally, might be shattered by the blow. From his present peak of happy anticipation, with all his personal reforms and good intentions for the future, he might plunge to absolute ruin.

Was Blanche worth that? Frankly, now I wasn't sure. I shrank back from making any decision, one way or another. When Blanche suggested that she and Gus and I have dinner together, I said, "I'm sorry, I can't. I have an appointment with Dr. Collings."

This was only partly true. I had turned over to Raffles Museum the archaeological objects I had unearthed, and Dr. Collings and I had made tentative plans to get together and

discuss them. When I telephoned him, he said, "Richard, I've got good news for you. Sultan Ibrahim has found an *Agni Mani*."

Blanche and the complications of love were immediately swept out of my mind. "Where? When? How?"

Dr. Collings chuckled. "Don't waste time asking me. Get over and ask Ibrahim himself."

I quickly did so. The sultan, when I arrived at his run-down palace, had to smile at my excitement.

"Where is it?" I demanded. "Where is the *Agni Mani*?"

Ibrahim held up one hand, still smiling. "Please, Baron—allow me to be a proper host."

Impatiently, I had to wait until the table at which we sat was piled with refreshments. Only then did Ibrahim sit forward, almost like a conspirator, and say, "Do you know where Pontianak is?"

"It's a territory in Borneo, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's where you'll find an *Agni Mani*. The Sultan of Pontianak has one."

"How do you know?"

Ibrahim's excitement was almost as great as my own. "Because I've seen it!"

"When?"

"About a month ago. I had made a trip to Pontianak on one of my ships and paid a courtesy call on the sultan. It was the first time I had ever met him. As soon as I was led into his presence, my attention was caught by the stone in a ring he was wearing." Ibrahim's voice lowered with the intensity of his feelings. "Although I had never before seen a fire pearl, I instinctively knew this was one! Baron, it lives! You can see the spark of life in it!"

I wanted desperately to believe Ibrahim, but I had been disappointed before. I had to be sure. The surface appearance of a gem can be misleading. "Did you obtain any proof that this was indeed a fire pearl?"

"The very best. The sultan himself admitted it to me. There are other indications. Pontianak is a small but prosperous domain. It is one of the few sultanates that have not been completely subjugated by the Dutch or British. In fact, the sultan is treated with great respect by the colonial powers and has been invited to visit various European countries. Now, why should the prestige and power of one potentate rise in this manner, while others are falling? There can be only

one answer: The Sultan of Pontianak is backed by the magic of an *Agni Mani*. I am convinced it is a true gem that he possesses."

"So am I!" I abruptly got up to leave.

Surprised, Ibrahim said, "Where are you going?"

"To Pontianak!"

Getting out of Singapore, however, was not a simple matter. The *Yongmin* was still under charter, and the contract had to be terminated. This took several days, as I fretted and fumed. Then the ship had to be checked over and supplied. While this was being taken care of, Mr. Yee found cargo that we could carry—machinery for a small factory in Pontianak.

Sultan Ibrahim also helped out. He gave me a letter of introduction to the Sultan of Pontianak and, because neither Legendijk nor McRae had ever been to that part of Borneo, supplied us with two Malay seamen who knew the waters well.

Then Gus made an astonishing proposal. "I think we should take Blanche along on this trip with us."

I stared at him. "Are you mad? She'd be the only woman on board ship—and, besides, we don't know what dangers we're heading into."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," scoffed Gus. "The *Yongmin* is as safe and comfortable as a yacht, and the trip would do Blanche a world of good. She's been working at Raffles too long. She needs a rest."

"Well, let her get it somewhere else," I said. "I'm not carrying any white woman to Borneo."

Gus turned stubborn. "Then you're not carrying me, either, Richard. If Blanche doesn't go, I don't go. We can break up our partnership right here and now."

Again I stared at him. "Gus, you're not serious."

"I am."

"Does Blanche know about all this?" I asked him.

"No, it was my own idea. I don't want to be parted from her."

I felt relieved. I was sure Blanche would never agree to make the voyage to Borneo, one of the most savage areas left in the world. Headhunting cannibals still roamed the jungles of the interior.

"Well, all right," I said, "let's ask Blanche. If she wants to go, she can go."

To my surprise, Blanche jumped at the chance to make the trip. "Borneo! How exciting! Of course, I want to go!"

Weakly I said, "But what about your job at Raffles? Don't you have to give notice?"

Blanche flashed one of her impish grins. "Sure—that this is the last night I'll be singing there. I'll be on the *Yongmin* when she pulls out!"

Actually, Blanche endeared herself to everyone aboard the *Yongmin* before we ever left Singapore. We had to lay over in Keppel Harbor for two days while the cargo of machinery was being hoisted into the holds and made secure. Blanche, who had already moved into her cabin, used this time to help out in a variety of ways.

First, just before lunch one day, the Chinese cook fell ill—probably from the effects of his own meals. Blanche promptly took over and turned out a French omelette that left us all sighing with contentment. Even McRae, who normally preferred whisky to food, rolled his eyes at Blanche and said, "If you promise to love, honor, and cook for me, my dear, I'll marry you right now!"

Legendijk was the next to fall. He came up on the bridge one time looking unusually well-groomed. Normally the big Dutchman looked as though an elephant had slept in his clothes.

"What do you think!" he grinned at me. "Blanche pressed this suit for me! Wasn't that nice of her?"

Later that same day I came across Blanche attending a sick sailor. Several others waited in line.

"I once took a nursing course," Blanche explained to me. "Some of these men suffer from prickly heat, and several have symptoms of malaria. I'll put them all right before we reach Borneo."

More was to come. While I was sitting in the saloon, working on some papers, Blanche came in, carrying a bucket of water and a sponge. She was wearing a cotton housedress, and a bandanna had been tied about her blond curls.

"Oh, no!" I said. "You're not going to scrub the floor!"

She laughed. "No, just the paneling. It's such beautiful wood, and it's never been properly cleaned. Go on with your work—I won't bother you."

But she did, although pleasantly. She looked flushed and happy, and I liked the way she kept brushing away stray curls with the back of her hand. I felt very close to her.

"You know, Blanche," I finally said, "you amaze me. A few nights ago you were a stylish, sophisticated singer in a nightclub. Now you're a real housewife."

She glanced at me over her shoulder and grinned. "It's in my blood. My father's folks were Provençal peasants."

I smiled. "Then you should make some man a good wife."

"I will—when I find him!"

I was about to follow up this provocative remark when Gus walked in. The moment was lost. I went back to my work.

We sailed the next afternoon. The tropical sun was blazing, but Blanche, with great ingenuity, had spread canvas over a portion of the deck. We sat there in the shade and sipped iced drinks, really feeling like wealthy yachtsmen.

My thoughts were divided. When Blanche was near, I thought of her, marveling at her beauty, industry, and influence. She had hung curtains made of colorful sarongs in all the cabins, taught the cook some decent recipes, and had us all dressing up for dinner. Afterward she would play her portable phonograph and sing for us. There was no doubt that Blanche had turned this trip from a dangerous adventure into a delightful pleasure cruise—or, at least, as far as it had gone.

Yet, when she was out of sight, my mind turned hungrily to other food for thought. I dreamed of the *Agni Mani* I was on my way to see.

CHAPTER XII

On the third day out of Singapore, we sighted the coast of Western Borneo. Our two Malay seamen then took over—one at the wheel, the other calling directions from the rail of the bridge—and we carefully moved into the estuary of the Kapuas River.

The *Yongmin* slid past a series of fishing platforms standing over the water on poles. On one of them fishermen were hauling in a net filled with squirming fish, which glistened like

a mass of quicksilver. As we neared the jungle-lined shore, a flight of white cranes rose and crossed above our masts.

Our Malay seamen cautiously kept the *Yongmin* in mid-stream. Drifting timber occasionally bumped against the ship. The jungle was on both sides of us now, the tall trees entwined with creeper plants. Crocodiles basked on the sunny mud flats, and pelicans, hornbills, and egrets flew overhead, lazily flapping their large wings.

Once we passed an isolated jungle clearing. A few bamboo huts perched on high poles driven into the marshy earth.

"Who lives there?" I asked the Malay at the rail.

"Dayaks, the aborigines of Borneo."

Some of the huts, I noticed, were decorated with bleached human skulls.

"They don't still hunt heads, do they?" I asked.

The Malay grinned. "Oh, no, not these Dayaks. The skulls you see there are just family heirlooms." The Malay pointed to the interior. "But in there—yes, the Dayaks still hunt heads."

I stopped talking to the Malay. He was too busy watching the river, which was a navigator's nightmare of shallows and currents. Luckily, there was little traffic coming downstream. A small, ancient steamer passed us, then a few native dug-outs.

Pontianak town came into view with unexpected suddenness. Two factory chimneys loomed above the jungle, and after the *Yongmin* rounded a bend, the town itself spread away on both sides of the river. It was a bustling settlement, with plenty of activity in the broad, paved streets. Modern stone buildings stood side by side with older structures made of jungle wood. The entire scene was dominated by a towering pagoda-shaped building—the sultan's palace.

I wanted to call at the palace at once, but I knew certain preliminaries were necessary. We anchored near the rubber-processing factory where we were to deliver our cargo of machinery, and I stood at the rail, impatiently waiting for the factory's agent to come out. A small Dutch steamer and a score of native sailing ships lay close to us. There were no docks at this point of the river.

Finally the factory's agent rowed out in a canoe, followed by a number of flat-bottomed barges. The agent was a young Chinese. As soon as he came aboard, I pulled him aside and

asked, "Can you deliver a message to the sultan's palace for me?"

The Chinese bobbed his head. "Yes, can do."

"Good!" I handed him the letter of introduction from Sultan Ibrahim, along with my own personal note requesting an audience. "Get these over to the palace just as soon as you can. Wait for an answer."

The agent came back in about half an hour, triumphantly grinning. He handed me a note written in English on royal stationery. It read:

Dear Baron:

We shall be pleased indeed to welcome you and your party to the palace. May I suggest that you call about teatime, so that you will escape the heat of the afternoon.

Prince Saba

Secretary to the Sultan

Blanche and Gus were almost as excited as I was over the note. We put on our best clothes and later that afternoon climbed into the *Yongmin's* longboat and were rowed across the river to the palace. Blanche wore a linen suit that showed her shapely legs to advantage. On her head was a stylish little hat. She looked very smart.

We had to walk across a small bridge to reach the palace gate, where two sentries stood. A uniformed attendant was then summoned, and after I had shown him our invitation, we were ushered into an enormous waiting room.

The size and magnificence of the room was awesome. It was like standing in a cathedral. Silent, we looked around at the intricate carvings on the blackwood walls, the life-sized oil paintings of the sultan's ancestors, the tall curtained windows, the splendid Persian carpet and high-backed chairs.

Another attendant entered, this one a white-haired courtier in a gold-braided uniform. He bowed to us, and we followed him into what appeared to be a large, elaborately furnished office. Green and gold silk brocade covered the walls, and gilded French-style furniture was arranged on a floral carpet that spread over the entire floor.

A dark, slender young man stood facing us, wearing a royal gold jacket. He had soft brown eyes and a big, rather incongruous black moustache. He smiled, bowed, and said, "I

am Prince Saba. Welcome to the palace. If you will be seated, tea will be served at once."

We sat down around a beautiful rosewood tea table, but the prince remained standing.

"This is the sultan's work chamber," he explained, gesturing about the room. A large desk was covered with framed, autographed photographs of European and Oriental royalty. The sultan's chair was of carved ivory. On the wall behind it was his coat of arms—a star and half-moon in a shield upheld by two lions rampant and surmounted by the royal crown.

By now Blanche had found her voice. "How wonderful!" she exclaimed, pointing to a huge globe cut from rock crystal and inlaid with multicolored precious stones. "And that gorgeous chandelier!" We all followed her gaze overhead to a massive cut-glass chandelier that flashed and glittered in the slanting sunlight.

The prince's smile broadened. He was obviously pleased at the impression the palace had made on us. He sat down and, while tea was being served, told us some of the history of the royal residence.

I grew impatient, wondering what was keeping the sultan. Finally, as politely as I could, I said to Prince Saba, "Is the sultan not having tea with us?"

The prince stared at me quizzically a moment, then said, "Well, hardly. The sultan is on his way to Europe."

I felt as though someone had pulled the chair out from under me. "He's what?"

"On his way to Europe. He left four days ago."

"When will he be back?"

"Not for quite some time. The sea voyage there and back will take at least two months. Then, in Europe, the sultan will be visiting a number of countries. I should not be surprised if he is away for as much as a year."

I inwardly groaned, remembering what Ibrahim had told me about the Sultan of Pontianak's proposed trip to Europe. I had arrived too late.

Blanche sympathetically placed her hand on my arm and said, "Oh, Richard, I'm so sorry!" Gus put his arm around my shoulders, as though to lend me strength to bear this latest disappointment.

Prince Saba looked puzzled. "I do not understand. . . ."

"The Baron has been searching for an *Agni Mani* for many years," Gus explained. "After traveling all over the

Orient, he recently learned that the Sultan of Pontianak had a fire pearl. That's why he came here—to see the *Agni Mani*."

Prince Saba showed genuine concern. "Oh, how frustrating! I wish I could help, but, of course, the sultan keeps the *Agni Mani* with him at all times." The prince suddenly brightened. "There's one consolation. I can show you photographs of the *Agni Mani*."

He left the room and quickly came back with a small velvet-bound album of photographs. The pictures were different views of the same thing—a ring set with a shiny black stone, the *Agni Mani*. My interest revived, I closely studied the stone. It was strangely grooved, as though it had whirled through intense heat, and even in the black-and-white photographs I thought I could detect a tiny, living flame.

"How long has the sultan had this stone?" I asked Prince Saba.

"All his life. It has been with the dynasty for three hundred years. One of the sultan's ancestors acquired the sacred gem from an unknown source shortly before he came here from Arabia and founded the kingdom. Since then the *Agni Mani* has been inherited by successive sultans, and its possession has protected each ruler and perpetuated the dynasty."

"Do you really believe that?" I asked.

The prince looked shocked. "I would not dare disbelieve it! The stone is magic! It can give or take away power and fortune!"

"Have you yourself ever witnessed such magic?"

"Many times. Colonial rulers who have wiped out other dynasties have bowed to the Sultan of Pontianak. Yet our little kingdom has practically no armed force. How else can you explain its survival except by the magic of the *Agni Mani*?"

"I don't know," I said. "Can you tell me any more about the powers of the stone—powers that you yourself have witnessed?"

"Yes. One time the sultan went on a tour of the interior. He noticed a strange flashing in the fire pearl, like an arrow come to life and pointing. He followed the arrow and found the site of what has become the biggest and richest diamond mine in this part of the world."

"Diamonds!" said Blanche, her feminine instincts aroused. "Are there diamonds to be found around here?"

The prince smiled at her. "Well, not just for the looking.

You have to know where to go—and the jungles are unhealthy and unsafe. Much wealth lies hidden there, but the price of finding it is often death."

I brought the subject back to fire pearls.

"Do you know of anyone else who possesses an *Agni Mani*?" I asked the prince.

He gave me a rather startled glance. He started to say something, then stopped, as though he had changed his mind. To cover his sudden nervousness, he took the album from me and closed it. "I think I have spoken enough for now, Baron. Will you be in Pontianak long?"

"For at least a few days."

"Then we will speak together again."

I sensed the dismissal. Blanche, Gus, and I made our farewells and left the palace.

It was dark as we rowed back across the river, and my disappointment returned. I had come so close to seeing an *Agni Mani*, only to miss the chance! It was maddening.

To cheer me up, Blanche put her hand on my arm and said, "Let's look around town, Richard. You'll feel better."

She was right. As we walked through the busy streets, I gradually came out of my gloom. Rickshaws rolled along the pavement, jockeying for position, and the headlights of an occasional passing car projected the enlarged moving shadows of pedestrians and palm trees against the white buildings. Dusky Javanese in batik turbans mingled with Chinese, Malays, and Dayaks. Some of the Dayaks wore their hair long, jungle-style, with bangs on the forehead like a Dutch bob.

The dimly lighted shops were doing a good business. A recorded native song blared from a crowded café, and, next door to it, a movie house was outlined in electric bulbs. An American motion picture was advertised, and a number of Europeans stood studying the garish posters.

A jeweler's window finally attracted us. We went in and asked to see some local diamonds. They were fairly good stones, but inexpertly cut and, it seemed to me, overpriced.

To hold my attention, the Chinese proprietor brought out a glass bottle filled with grains of alluvial gold. It was dark yellow and of high quality. My interest quickened.

"Where did this come from?" I asked the Chinese.

He gestured vaguely. "All over. Take long time to pick up."

"Hasn't anyone thought of mining it with modern machinery?"

"Not enough gold for that." The Chinese pushed the bottle toward me. "But you buy—can start big company—make plenty money."

It took me a while to sort this deal out, but I finally got it. Australian prospectors, it seemed, laboriously picked up enough of the first-class gold to take home as samples. Then they floated bogus mining companies, swindling credulous investors out of thousands of pounds.

Pontianak, we soon learned, was quite a hunting ground for such unscrupulous white adventurers. We ran into a group of them later that night in the bar of the Pontianak Hotel, a rambling frame building reached at high tide by crossing a rickety boardwalk. This was no easy task in the darkness. Swarms of fireflies flickered between the inky palm fronds, creating an illusion that the firmament was milling in irregular motion. Gus nearly fell into the water. Blanche grabbed him and laughed, "Drunk again, and he hasn't even got a glass in his hand yet!"

A tinkling piano led us to the noisy, smoky, crowded bar. Heads turned as we entered, and through the haze I could make out brown, yellow, black, and white faces. The whites started drifting over to our table as soon as we sat down. Some were beachcombers trying to cadge drinks. Others were outright frauds.

One scrubby character pompously introduced himself as the managing director of a mining company. Another, a long-jawed Australian, put his head close to mine and whispered confidentially, "Look, mate, how'd you like to make a million pounds?"

I didn't even bother to reply, but that didn't stop the Australian. He covertly displayed a small bottle containing a few grains of gold. "I know where there's a mine full of this stuff, mate. All I need is a thousand pounds to get it out. Give me the thousand, mate, and I'll sign over half the mine to you."

I politely declined the offer. The Dutch piano player then staggered over to the table. He was a fat, redheaded fellow in a sweat-stained undershirt and soiled khaki pants. There was something both pathetic and comical about him. He had once

been a prosperous trader, he told me, but *baboes* (native women) and drink had ruined him. I bought him a glass of whisky, and he staggered back to the piano.

Surprisingly, one of the whites who visited our table turned out to be a man of substance. He was a sunburned Englishman named Hasselt. He had spent three years prospecting in Western Borneo and had invested some of his profits in smoked rubber sheets. When he learned I was the owner of the *Yongmin*, he said, "I'm looking for a ship to carry my rubber to Semarang, Java. Would you care for the job?"

With the deadbeats I'd met that night, I was more than a little skeptical. "I'd need a down payment."

"Oh, certainly." Hasselt took out a checkbook. "Would a thousand Dutch gulden be enough? You can cash my check here in Pontianak or in Java, whichever you prefer."

This was an unexpected stroke of good fortune. I had hoped to go to Java eventually, anyway, to follow up certain leads on the *Agni Mani*—and here the way was being paid for me. I quickly concluded the deal with Hasselt across the whisky-stained table.

I was curious about the Englishman. He was intelligent and well educated and had degrees in geology and mineralogy. "What brought you to this back end of the world?" I asked him.

He gestured with his pipe toward the jungles. "The chance of making a fortune. There are all kinds of wealth out there. I've personally discovered rich deposits of platinum and copper and staked my claims."

"Have you started any mining operations?"

Hasselt smiled wryly. "Ah, well, now, that's entirely another matter. Mining these claims and getting the minerals out of the jungle is a tremendous problem. The heat is insufferable and the wilderness all but impenetrable. Leeches bleed a man white while mosquitoes are chewing his skin to bits. Then, too, the Dayaks don't take kindly to strangers hanging around the woods."

"Are the Dayaks as wild as they're reputed to be?"

Hasselt shook his head. "No, not really—although some still live in the old wild-man-of-Borneo tradition. Heads roll in tribal warfare, and the flesh of dead enemies is eaten in victory ceremonies. Then there are certain customs that are still followed. A young bridegroom, for instance, is supposed

to account for a couple of heads from an enemy tribe before he can marry."

"Do any white men ever lose their heads?"

"It's happened, although not recently. Some Dayaks are even glad to see a white man appear, provided he doesn't stay too long. It usually means gifts for them." Hasselt peered closely at me, as though trying to read my mind—which, in fact, he did. "Why? Are you thinking of making a trip into the jungle?"

I shrugged. "Well, I have a few days to kill, and I thought I might do a little sight-seeing."

The Englishman shook his head. "There's no such thing as sight-seeing in this part of Borneo. Any venture into these jungles is an exploration. You go properly equipped or else you don't come back alive."

"Well," I said, "I wasn't exactly thinking of going into the jungle—or at least not very far. I just thought I might take a trip up the river."

Hasselt nodded. "That's not so bad. In fact, there's a spot about forty miles upstream that might interest you. It's a place where diamonds are found beneath a waterfall."

The mention of diamonds quickly brought Blanche into the conversation. "You mean real diamonds? Are they actually underwater? How do you get to them?"

The Englishman laughed. "Oh, now, just a minute, miss! These diamonds are in the territory of a powerful Dayak chief. He's friendly enough, but he won't stand for anyone poking around among his diamonds. A couple of the bleached skulls decorating his rooftop look suspiciously like those of white men."

"You're joking!" said Blanche.

"I am not. I can take you up there and show you myself. In fact, I will."

"Good!" said Blanche. "When do we leave?"

"We," I told her, "are not leaving. I might, and Gus might, but not you, young lady. It's too dangerous."

I reckoned without Blanche's feminine wiles. The next day, when Hasselt came aboard the *Yongmin* to have lunch with us, the shrewd little Frenchwoman turned out a meal that left us all contentedly sighing and in her debt. Before we realized it, as we discussed the trip upstream, Blanche was included in the plans.

She soon made herself useful. She prepared provisions, mosquito nets, and bedding, all of which was stowed aboard Hasselt's riverboat when it was brought alongside the *Yongmin* later that afternoon. The long, narrow boat was flat-bottomed and equipped with a powerful outboard motor. It was manned by two grinning Dayaks who, because Hasselt had long before given up trying to pronounce their real names, were simply known as Pat and Mike.

Both Dayaks promptly fell in love with Blanche—or at least her blond hair. As she showed them how to span a canvas over the boat to ward off the sun, neither of the natives could take their eyes off her shimmering golden curls. It was a gaze of abject, almost comical adoration.

I liked Pat and Mike. They had been working as guides to Europeans for many years and had learned to speak some Dutch and English. Their hair was cut short, and they wore the white man's khaki shirt and shorts. Nevertheless, with their slim, muscular build, copper coloring, and strong features, they had an air of native nobility. Except for their almost constant grins, they looked like North American Indians.

CHAPTER XIII

We left the *Yongmin* before dawn. A cool mist clung to the dark river as we clambered down the gangway and crawled into the narrow boat. A storm lantern hung beneath the improvised canvas roof, and in the shadowy light we all seemed strangely pale.

Gus looked sleepy. Blanche, wearing sensible boots, breeches, and shirt, appeared briskly efficient. Pat and Mike, one at the prow of the boat and the other at the stern, were grinning as usual. Hasselt, pipe in mouth, calmly gave the order to shove off, and we were on our way.

The clamor of the outboard motor precluded easy conversation. Besides, none of us wanted to talk. There is something mystic and soul-stirring about traveling on a jungle river at night—almost like floating into another world, a dark sphere where tremendous truths suddenly seem near. We sat on the boat's benches, silent, wrapped in our own thoughts.

As usual, the *Agni Mani* was on my mind. Although I had not mentioned it to the others, I hoped to find a fire pearl in the diamond-studded domain of the Dayaks.

By now I realized there was greater significance to my search than its explicit objective—a mysterious black stone. In some strange manner the *Agni Mani* had become associated in my mind with truth. Each man must seek his own truth, I knew, and man's quest is primarily a search for himself. Perhaps, in finding the *Agni Mani*, I would find myself—and truth.

Then there was Prince Saba. I was sure he had been about to tell me something just before we left the palace—something important. I would have to talk to the prince again.

About five miles upstream a fan of light flashed above the jungle, heralding sunrise. The sky turned pale blue tinged with orange, and the river changed from black to brown. Flocks of green parrots screeched in low flight over our heads, and a large fish splashed near the boat.

Tangled jungle lined the banks. Dark ghosts of night still lurked in the dense foliage, obscuring the borderline of land and water. The sputtering noise of our motor shook life out of the shadows. Flocks of waterfowl took wing, and an enormous snake, about 20 feet long, slid from a bamboo thicket and spiraled out of sight into the river.

"Water python," commented Hasselt, taking his pipe from his mouth briefly.

We were all coming to life now, particularly when we spotted the bubbling snouts of three crocodiles only a few yards from the boat. Gus snatched up a rifle.

"Don't fire!" Hasselt quickly cautioned him. "If you merely wounded one of those fellows, his powerful tail would lash this boat to bits. As long as you're in the boat, crocodiles won't bother you. Just keep your hands out of the water."

A few miles farther upriver we turned from the muddy Kapuas into a crystal-clear stream that branched through an entrancing wonderland. In the golden sunlight peacock-colored butterflies bounced about us and settled on the boat like floral decorations. Trees bearing large, tulip-shaped blossoms grew on shore, and fallen petals covered the ground beneath and drifted on the water. Pink-nosed monkeys peeped from the branches. The warm air was heady with the sweet smell of wild frangipani.

"Talk about paradise . . ." I heard Blanche murmur.

There were perils in this paradise. A pair of five-foot monitor lizards slipped into the water, swimming like eels past a bald-headed marabou bird which was standing on one leg and eying us aggressively. The hostile gaze was intensified a hundredfold in the glowering red eyes of a hulking orang-utang watching us from a jungle branch. The red-haired beast, nearly six feet tall, had brutal, almost human features. The mouth was vicious, the nose flat, with distended, snorting nostrils.

I heard Blanche catch her breath. "What an ugly monster!"

"Dangerous, too," remarked Hasselt. "That ape weighs about four hundred pounds and has the strength of five men."

Blanche shuddered. "He seems to be staring right at me."

Hasselt smiled wryly. "Some male apes have an eye for the ladies. They've been known to carry off Dayak women and mutilate them."

I glanced at Blanche. She tried to appear unconcerned, but I was sure she'd just suppressed another shudder. Uneasily I wondered if I'd been wise in bringing her along.

As we moved upstream, the banks edged closer and closer toward us. The green canopy of trees finally vaulted overhead, shutting out the sun. The monotonous putting of the boat's motor was now almost drowned in the weird clatter, shrill whistles, and mocking cackles emanating from the jungle all around us. Blue-feathered cranes with red legs waded near the shore, pecking at reptiles and fish. The water was so clear I could see right down to the sandy bottom, where large fish floated motionlessly.

Gradually the stream widened again, drawing the trees apart and letting in the noonday sun. We could feel its scorching heat even beneath the canvas. Our faces glistened with sweat.

"There's a Dayak village up ahead," Hasselt told us. "We'll stop there for lunch."

The village turned out to be a cluster of flimsy huts built on high poles. A kind of wharf had been built of logs along the shore, and as we made fast in the shade of a tree, the villagers came hurrying down to look us over.

These were "tame" Dayaks, Hasselt told us, and they looked it. The men were short, only about five feet tall, and their dark skin was flaked with whitish eczema. The bellies of the naked children protruded like basketballs. The women,

bare to the waist, had hanging breasts and long, matted hair, through which they stared at us.

"A comb and brassiere salesman could make a fortune around here," Blanche remarked.

"Only if he was willing to take his pay in damar gum," Hasselt smiled. "That's a kind of rosin these natives collect from jungle trees."

The Englishman handed out cigarettes to the Dayaks, who squatted along the shore, happily puffing away, watching us eat and chattering among themselves about us. Blanche tried to pass sandwiches to the women and children, but they only backed away, grinning and shaking their heads.

"Ask them if we can look at their homes," I suggested to Hasselt.

The Dayaks readily agreed and took us on a quick tour of the village. The interiors of the huts were walled with palm leaf and hung with blowpipes, spears, and brightly colored masks. Above some of the entrances dangled what looked like dried coconuts. They were actually shrunk heads, lopped off in battle and preserved by the warlike ancestors of our hosts. The skin had been dried and drawn tight on these macabre mementos, and sightless eyesockets stared blankly from beneath the stringy hair.

"I've seen enough," Blanche decided. "Let's get out of here."

The rest of us felt the same way. We climbed back into the boat, waved farewell to the Dayaks, and continued upstream. In the afternoon heat, with no air stirring within the jungle walls, a kind of sodden inertia settled over us. Although the banks of the stream were closing in again, we didn't pay any attention to snakes which hung overhead or monkeys which threw twigs and berries at us.

A sharp exclamation from Hasselt brought us out of our lethargy. "Damn! Look at that!" He was pointing ahead, where a gigantic tree had fallen across the stream, blocking us from going any farther by boat.

"Are we far from the waterfall?" I asked the Englishman.

"Luckily, no. We can walk the rest of the way."

Getting ashore, however, was no easy matter. The water along the bank was too shallow for our boat, and it would have been risky to wade through the mud. Dark shapes, which could have been logs or crocodiles, floated nearby. We finally

tied up alongside the fallen tree and crawled ashore on our hands and knees over the slippery, moss-covered trunk.

Pat stayed with the boat. Mike went along with us, leading the way. Behind him, in single file, came Gus, Blanche, myself, and Hasselt. All of us except Blanche carried shotguns.

The going was not too rough, although we had to keep ducking under branches or pushing them aside. A slight ridge ran beside the stream, and as long as we stuck to this, we were all right.

"Stay right behind Mike," Hasselt warned us from the rear. "Don't step anywhere that he hasn't stepped."

We soon found out the reason for this warning. Blanche spotted an exotic cluster of orchids, exclaimed, "Oh, how beautiful!" and stepped off the ridge to reach them. She immediately sank up to her armpits in soggy, moss-covered mud.

We quickly pulled her out. She looked so funny I couldn't be angry with her. Black ooze covered her from boots to breasts, plastering her clothes to her body and outlining her trim figure. In her confusion Blanche had also smudged her face with mud, giving her a clownlike effect.

"I could get you a job in a circus!" I laughed at her.

Blanche didn't think it was so funny. She swore in French, angrily slapping at the slime on her blouse.

"Do you want to go back to the boat and change clothes?" I asked her.

"Certainly not! Nobody's going to say that I held up the parade!"

Blanche got back in line and stomped along ahead of me, still slapping at her clothes. The heat soon turned the mud from sodden black to dusty beige. It came away in great powdery puffs each time Blanche swatted herself. By the time we reached the waterfall, she was dry and back to her normal, good-natured self.

We stood in a clearing beside the roaring waterfall, getting our breath and looking up at the miniature Niagara. The rushing water cascaded over a high rocky slope, plunging to the pool below, where it foamed, swirled, and spread away to calm clearness. An iridescent rainbow hung in the mist over the falls.

Blanche eyed the pool longingly. "If you fellows would just turn your backs for a while," she told us, "I could get these clothes off and jump in there."

"If you did," Hasselt warned her, "you'd get a blowpipe dart right in the neck. This pool is closely guarded. We're being watched right now."

As though to prove the Englishman's point, two Dayaks stepped out of the underbrush, both armed with blowpipes. They were fierce-looking warriors, stark naked except for skimpy loincloths. Their hair was long and cut in that peculiar Dutch bob fashion with bangs on the forehead.

They stared at us a moment, then recognized Hasselt and Mike. The Dayaks held up their blowpipes in a gesture of welcome, and one let out a short, sharp cry that echoed above the roar of the falls. A score of other Dayaks immediately surged from the underbrush behind us. A similar number appeared on the far side of the pool. We were completely surrounded.

Apprehensively I glanced at Hasselt.

"It's all right," he assured me. "The chief is an old friend of mine. He'll be down any minute now." The Englishman took three cartons of cigarettes from his haversack and passed them to Blanche, Gus, and myself. "Just give these to the chief. That'll make you old friends, too."

The chief, when he appeared, looked like a leftover from a Halloween party. He was a fat, moon-faced fellow, wearing blue cotton trousers and a derby hat. One arm was covered with thick silver bracelets. On the other was the craziest wristwatch I'd ever seen—a battered, old-fashioned alarm clock that dangled from a silver chain.

As the chief and his party came slipping and sliding down a rocky path alongside the waterfall, I heard Gus suppress a giggle. I quickly frowned at him. I had a feeling this was no laughing matter. The chief might look like a slapstick comedian, but his followers were no fools.

Hasselt seemed to share my feelings. He greeted the chief respectfully, bowed to him, and introduced the rest of us. In turn, we handed over our gifts of cigarettes. The chief accepted them as his due, barely noticing Gus and me. He only had eyes for Blanche. After staring a few moments, he excitedly pointed at her hair and gabbled something to the other Dayaks.

"He says you look like a sun goddess," Hasselt explained to Blanche. "Beautiful blonde women are extremely rare in this part of the world."

Blanche grinned and said, "Tell him to hell with the compliments—just show us the diamonds."

Hasselt spoke to the chief, who bobbed his head as though saying, "Why, sure, sure!" I was beginning to like the big fellow. That derby hat was irresistible, especially the way it was rakishly tilted over his bangs. It considerably alleviated the fearsome effect of the chief's bloodshot eyes, broad nose, hairy nostrils, and pockmarked face.

"Watch closely," Hasselt told us. "The chief has agreed to demonstrate how his men gather diamonds. It's probably the world's strangest mining operation."

At shouted orders from the chief, four Dayaks dived into the pool. They swam to a number of bamboo poles that stuck out of the water. Each Dayak grabbed a pole, took a deep breath, and disappeared underwater.

"The poles are stuck into the bottom of the pool," Hasselt explained. "The divers pull themselves down the poles to the bottom, then scoop up handfuls of gravel. They shake the pay dirt around in the water until diamonds appear."

"My God!" said Gus. "As simple as that! Why doesn't somebody move modern machinery in here?"

"Because it would be almost impossible to get it this far upstream. Besides, even if you did, white heads would start rolling all over Western Borneo. Theoretically, the Dutch have jurisdiction in this area, but the real power still lies with Dayak chiefs like our friend here."

The heads of the Dayak divers were now popping into view. One held up his hand triumphantly and swam ashore. Dripping wet, he pulled himself out of the pool and handed to the chief a large, rough diamond. In its uncut state, the stone had a cloudy yellow color.

"It doesn't sparkle," Blanche complained, disappointed.

"When it's cut," I told her, "that'll be a beauty. It must be eight or nine carats."

The chief emphatically nodded, almost as though he understood me, and presented the diamond to Blanche.

"He wants you to have it," Hasselt explained. "It's a gift."

Overwhelmed, Blanche tried to thank the chief, but he just held up one hand, grinning and shaking his head as much as to say, "Think nothing of it! Think nothing of it!"

Unexpectedly, the alarm of his clock went off, startling all of us. This greatly pleased the chief. He laughed, slapped his knee, and pointed at us as though he'd played a great joke.

Then, solemnly, he held up one hand for attention, made a pass like a magician over the tinkling clock, and switched off the alarm. In the silence the chief proudly surveyed us. His jutting chin went up and down, wordlessly demanding, "There! Can any of you do that?"

"That clock is the chief's most valued possession," Hasselt explained, "in spite of the fact that he has a fortune in diamonds. He's even convinced himself he's performing magic when he turns the alarm on and off."

The chief was now gesturing toward the top of the falls.

"Come on," Hasselt told us, "we're being invited to dinner."

After clambering up the steep, rocky path, we had to stand for a few moments at the top, breathing heavily and taking in the native village. It was composed of a number of huts clustered about a larger hut, set higher than the others. This was the chief's "palace." He gestured for us to climb the ladder to the entrance, and as we did so, I could see a swarm of women and children edging out of the surrounding huts to get a good look at us.

The floor of the chief's hut was made of mud plastered over the bamboo platform. Reed mats were scattered about, and we were urged to sit on these. I had to keep blinking my smarting eyes. Two charcoal fires were burning at the rear of the hut, and the smoke was so thick I could hardly see. A girl shyly shoved a bowl of fermented coconut milk into my hands.

As I sipped this and looked around, I gradually made out the decorations on the palm-leaf walls. They were white wooden masks, fiercely marked with red and black scrolls. A pair of mangy dogs crouched beneath the masks, growling at us. The women at the rear of the hut were busy over earthenware pots, cooking what later turned out to be a wild boar stew.

A younger woman sat near us, searching for lice in a warrior's clotted hair. Another woman was compressing a child's head between two flat pieces of wood. I glanced at Hasselt questioningly.

"That's a Dayak beauty treatment to insure the child will grow up with a flat forehead," he told me.

My attention was diverted by Blanche, who was loudly exclaiming over a bagful of diamonds that the chief had casually strewn on the floor. I gasped. Although the stones

were uncut, they ranged in color from blue to canary yellow, and some were as big as walnuts.

"Ask the chief if he'll sell me a diamond," I told Hasselt.

He shook his head. "He won't. That's one of the strange things about these Dayaks. The diamonds have a spiritual significance to them, and they refuse to sell any. With all the potential wealth they possess, they go on living under primitive conditions."

"Aren't they afraid somebody will steal the diamonds?" I asked.

The Englishman smiled and said something to the chief, who grunted and reached for his blowpipe. He quickly loaded and fired at one of the chickens roosting at the far end of the hut. The unsuspecting fowl caught the dart in its left eye and flopped to the floor. The chief's answer to my query was clear enough.

I still wanted one of those diamonds. On a hunch, I took out my fountain pen and drew a quick sketch of the chief. Fascinated, he reached for the pen and scribbled some scrolls on his left forearm. The result delighted him.

"Tell him I'll trade the pen for a diamond," I urged Hasselt.

The chief readily agreed to this, and, feeling just a little guilty, I pocketed a choice blue-white diamond.

I then asked Hasselt to inquire if the Dayaks had ever found a stone that would fit the description of an *Agni Mani*. The chief, preoccupied with penning a scroll on the nose of his favorite wife, shook his head. No black stones had ever been found in his area.

Dinner was now being served in earthenware bowls. It was tasty and filling, but afterward, I noticed, Blanche looked a little uncomfortable.

"What's the trouble?" I whispered.

"I have to go to the toilet."

With Gallic frankness, all during the trip upstream, Blanche had let us know whenever she felt the call of nature. One or another of us would then stand guard while she slipped behind a bush. Now, however, a peculiar problem arose.

"What do the Dayaks use for a toilet?" I asked Hasselt.

"The jungle. Pick your own spot."

I shrugged and motioned for Blanche to follow me. Outside, about a dozen Dayak women attached themselves to us and followed along like a procession winding through the village. I made shooing gestures, but the women paid no attention.

"Oh, to hell with them," Blanche finally said and plunged into the underbrush. "I can't wait!"

The women rushed after her. A few minutes later they came back, excitedly babbling among themselves. Several had their sarongs lifted high and, from the descriptive gestures they were making toward their bare undersides, I could see they had been impressed by Blanche's silk panties.

Shortly afterward, when Blanche herself had emerged from the bushes, the women came hurrying back, bringing along girl friends who had missed the fashion show. They all began gesturing for Blanche to pull down her breeches. Some even tried to unfasten her belt. It was all I could do to hustle the giggling Frenchwoman back to the chief's hut.

It was getting dark now. Damar torches had been lighted in the chief's hut, but these produced more soot and smoke than light.

"The chief has invited us to sleep here," Hasselt told me, "or we can go back to the boat. Which do you prefer?"

"We can't sleep in all this smoke," I said. "I'd rather go back to the boat."

The others agreed. We said our farewells and, accompanied by several Dayak warriors carrying torches, made our way down the steep slope alongside the waterfall.

The roar of the cascade followed us as we carefully moved along the stream. The reflection of the flickering torches sent huge red-black shadows leaping and dancing into the dark depths of the jungle. Pale, sickly moths fluttered about us, and fireflies winked among the bushes. Timber rotting on the ground shone with an eerie, fluorescent glow. No stars were visible beneath the jungle foliage, but the eyes of birds glimmered in the torchlight.

Pat heard us coming and turned on the boat's searchlight. The bright beam illuminated the tree-bridge we had to cross to get to the boat. Gus went first. Then Blanche got down on her hands and knees and started crawling across. She was about halfway when something stirred in the water below.

"Crocodiles!" exclaimed Hasselt. "Hold on, Blanche! Don't move!"

The warning was unnecessary. Blanche had already flattened herself on the slippery tree trunk, clinging to the mossy bark for dear life. Her eyes widened with fear as, out of the black water beneath her, emerged the crusty head and glar-

ing red eyes of a crocodile. The Dayaks jabbered excitedly behind me.

"Hold on, Blanche!" Hasselt called again. "Don't try to move! You might slip!"

Pat had already started out from the boat to help the stranded white woman. Mike was crawling toward her from the bank. Gus, Hasselt, and myself had our shotguns trained on the crocodile. Slowly, its long snout rose dripping out of the water, and its fearful jaws opened, exposing rows of sharp white teeth.

Hasselt and I fired at the same time, and the heavy charge flung the writhing crocodile back into the water, which foamed furiously. The shots unnerved Blanche, however, and she lost her grip and splashed into the stream. Pat and Mike promptly leaped after her, and I dropped my gun and scrambled out on the tree trunk, calling, "Hold up your hands, Blanche! Hold up your hands!"

Behind me, I could hear Hasselt firing again and again, and the boiling white water beneath me seemed to be agitated by scores of lashing crocodiles. Actually, it was only the threshing of Pat and Mike as they hoisted Blanche up to me. I grabbed her hands, pulled her up on the tree, and helped her along to the boat. I quickly flung a rope to Pat and pulled him to safety. Hasselt had already helped Mike up onto the tree trunk.

Gus stood beside me, firing at dark objects in the water which may have been crocodiles, logs, or merely shadows. He made me nervous. "Stop shooting," I finally told him, "before you hit one of us! Everybody's out of the water now."

Hasselt and Mike clambered aboard, and we cast off from the tree. Blanche was shivering, partly from her drenching and partly from the shock of her near escape from the crocodile. Still, even though her teeth were chattering, she grinned and said, "Oh, w-w-w-well, I w-w-wanted to go s-s-swimming, anyway!" She had a lot of courage, that girl.

I wrapped her in a blanket and told her, "Get out of those wet clothes. I'll get you some whisky."

We all had a pull from the bottle and, after dropping anchor in midstream, settled down for the night.

In the morning we started back to Pontianak town. The current carried the boat along swiftly and uneventfully, and we reached the *Yongmin* shortly after noon, full of the tales we had to tell Lagendijk and McRae.

It took another two days to complete the loading of Has-selt's rubber. While waiting, I tried several times to see Prince Saba, but he always put me off. Finally, only a few hours before we were to sail, he came out to the *Yongmin* of his own accord. He seemed nervous and secretive.

"Is there anyplace where we can talk in confidence?" he asked me.

"Of course." I led him into my cabin.

"I've just learned you're sailing for Java," the prince told me. "Perhaps that's a sign."

"A sign of what?"

"That I should help you in your quest for an *Agni Mani*."

The familiar excitement was rising in me again. "Then you do know where there's another fire pearl!"

"Yes." Prince Saba's voice lowered to an intense whisper. "It belongs to His Imperial Highness, the Susuhunan of Surakarta and Emperor of Java."

"Where can I find him?"

"At his capital, Solo." The prince placed his hand on my arm. "But I urge you to be careful. Do not make open inquiries about the *Agni Mani*. The emperor guards it closely and is wary that someone might try to steal it from him. He shows it only to distinguished visitors, usually heads of state."

"I could say I was a roving diplomat from Latvia," I suggested.

The prince stared at me blankly. He had obviously never heard of Latvia.

"That's a small country near Russia," I explained. "I once served in the diplomatic corps."

Prince Saba nodded thoughtfully. "With your title, Baron, the emperor might well receive you as a foreign diplomat. It would flatter him to think a European nobleman had traveled so far to see him. He is a very vain man."

"I'll remember that," I said. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes. I have a friend in the emperor's court, Prince Adipati. I believe he would help you. I'll give you a letter of introduction to him."

After I had received the letter, I profusely thanked the prince. I was also a little curious.

"Why are you doing this for me?" I asked.

Prince Saba smiled, somehow sadly. "We all seek something in life, but not all of us achieve our goals. I never have—perhaps because I have never been quite sure of what I

wanted. Without something to believe in, there can be no faith. I envy you your faith, Baron. I would not like to see you lose it. . . .”

A few hours later I was off again on another leg of my long search.

CHAPTER XIV

We left Pontianak on the afternoon tide and reached the open sea at evening. Blanche and I stood at the rail, watching the sunset. A thin mauve mist hung across the red ball of the sun, and feathery clouds flared along the horizon.

I felt very peaceful and close to Blanche. It was a two-day voyage to Semarang—a length of time which, on the vast, still sea, can take on the quality of eternity.

“Look,” I said, pointing to a pale Venus floating in the darkening blue of the eastern sky.

Blanche nodded. There was no need for words—not, at least until Gus joined us. He cracked a joke, and Blanche laughed, and the spell was broken. I excused myself, went to my cabin, and stretched out on the bunk.

Through an open porthole I could see the stars of the Southern Cross. They marked our course south to Java—and, possibly, to an *Agni Mani*. For a moment I felt happy. Then, oddly, my thoughts of the fire pearl were swept away by a quick, hard pang of jealousy and anger. What was I doing down here when Gus was up on the deck with Blanche? And what was she doing, playing two old friends against each other!

I half rose from the bunk, then sank back, remembering it was I who had left Blanche to roam the Malayan peninsula in search of an *Agni Mani*. I had made my choice. It was Gus who had chosen love as the object of his quest in life. Perhaps he had made the wiser choice. . . .

I must have dozed off. When I awoke—or half awoke—a waning moon was shining through my porthole. It palely illuminated a painted wooden mask that Blanche had hung in my cabin. She had jokingly told me that Dayak women used it to frighten bachelors into marriage.

A gentle flutter, like the motion of a woman's skirt, drew my attention to the cabin door. "Blanche . . ." I murmured, thinking she had come to me. But it was only the folds of my Chinese dressing gown billowing in a breeze. Sleep closed over my disappointment. . . .

In the morning we passed the misty outlines of the Mana Ada Islands. The sea was dark blue, and a brisk wind blew steadily. Blanche and Gus were playing cards in a sheltered corner of the deck.

"Come and join us," Blanche called to me.

Perversely, like many another confused and half-jealous male, I declined the offer. Instead, I joined a gang of seamen chipping away rust and repainting exposed parts of the *Yongmin*. I stubbornly kept hard at this work until we reached Semarang—where, to my relief, thoughts of the *Agni Mani* drove out of my mind what I considered to be romantic nonsense.

Lagendijk knew the port of Semarang well. He maneuvered the *Yongmin* past cargo vessels, tugboats, barges, and yachts, and dropped anchor in the inner roads. It was a clear, windy day, and a flock of seagulls shrilly circled our masts, diving for bits of bread that Blanche gaily tossed to them. She was smartly dressed in a blue silk suit and a chic little straw hat which she held on with one hand, resisting the snatches of the playful wind.

Gus and I were dressed up, too, in our best white sharkskin suits. As I stood at the rail, impatiently waiting to be taken ashore, I studied Semarang. Behind the warehouses along the waterfront, the neat white houses of the city rose into the green hills beyond. In the background loomed tall mountain peaks, partly obscured by purple haze.

The ship's longboat finally took us ashore. Blanche wanted to go to a beauty parlor, and Gus decided to accompany her. I went off to see the consignees of Hasselt's rubber sheets. They turned out to be a pair of portly, friendly Dutchmen who offered me a cargo of coffee beans to carry back to Singapore. I accepted, although the load exceeded the *Yongmin's* "safe" capacity.

The truth was, I was anxious to get rid of business matters and set off for Solo, capital of the Emperor of Java, which lay 70 miles to the southeast of Semarang.

"You would do best to hire a car and driver," one of the Dutchmen advised me. "If you like, I can arrange for a car

to meet you first thing tomorrow morning at the Jansen Hotel. Would that suit you?"

"Fine!"

After the arrangement was made, the two Dutchmen took me into town for lunch. So that I could get a more leisurely view of the city, we rode in a two-wheeled pony cart. Java and all the East Indies at that time were under the colonial rule of the Dutch, and the influence was plain to see in Semarang. The streets were clean, the houses and shops neat. Tamarind trees lined Bodjong, the main thoroughfare, which, rather than being in the traffic chaos characteristic of most Oriental cities, was separated into orderly, efficiently moving rows of autos, pony carts, and bicycles. A narrow-gauge steam train served as a streetcar, puffing along, a uniformed attendant clanging a hand-operated bell.

The sidewalks were thronged with Dutch and Javanese, their light and dark complexions weaving a contrasting pattern. The Javanese wore colorful turbans and sarongs. The women were slender and graceful, particularly in comparison to the corpulent Dutch.

My hosts took me to Smaber's Restaurant where, by coincidence, we ran into Blanche and Gus. We all sat together and ate *rijst tafel*, a formidable meal consisting of 40 different spiced dishes. About 20 Javanese waiters lined up to serve us individually with chicken, fish, meat, shrimps, pickles, spices, sauces, and dozens of vegetables. In the heat it seemed a murderous meal to me, but the Dutch apparently thought nothing of it. They methodically worked their way through the courses and washed them down with beer. Perhaps that was why, when lunch was over, the population collapsed for an afternoon snooze.

The city came back to life about four o'clock. Blanche and Gus went off to a tea dance at the Jansen Hotel, while I found a local historical museum and did some research on the Emperor of Java.

The roots of his family tree, I found, went deep. Among his forefathers was Darius the Great, Emperor of Persia, who invaded Greece 2500 years ago. The Java potentate's most colorful ancestor, however, was that swashbuckling adventurer immortalized in the *Arabian Nights* as Sinbad the Sailor. It was Sinbad who voyaged East and founded the mighty empire of Indonesia, which, at the peak of its power, covered an area larger than the United States.

This empire began to crumble with the arrival of the Dutch, about 400 years ago. Its core, the State of Surakarta, survived until 1749, when it, too, became part of the Netherlands East Indies. The Susuhunan of Surakarta, however, retained his autonomous rights and imperial privileges.

His full title, I learned, was His Imperial Highness, Susuhunan of Surakarta, Emperor of Java, His Holiness, Center Nail of the Earth, Commander in Chief in War, Servant of Allah the Compassionate, Lord of Honor Service and Defender of the Mohammedan Faith. He was the spiritual and worldly head of 2.5 million subjects, to whom he was infallible. They and many others beyond the borders of his state worshiped him as a god. Earthquakes and the eruption of volcanoes were regarded as signs of his displeasure.

Additional information was given to me by the local historian, a kindly little old Dutchman. The Susuhunan, he related, was fabulously wealthy. His treasure rooms were crammed with gold and gems.

"In fact," the historian went on, "there are palatial ruins throughout the country where untold wealth still lies hidden. The imperial princes had a casual habit of hiding their treasures, then forgetting about them. Every once in a while such a cache is uncovered."

I had always been skeptical about tales of buried treasure. I smiled at the old Dutchman and said, "Have you ever found any of this hidden gold?"

"No." He smiled and indicated the book-lined walls. "But then I have always sought for wealth of a different kind. . . ."

Early the next morning, a Sunday, we left Semarang in the hired car. Church bells were ringing, and a few starchily dressed Dutch had already appeared on Bodjong Boulevard. A dog barked at us, then, apparently appalled at having broken the Sabbath stillness, quickly disappeared.

Blanche, Gus, and I sat in the back seat of the car, a big open Cadillac. Our driver, a smiling Javanese, took Gombel Hill in second gear, leveled out on a plateau nearly a thousand feet above sea level, and sped through a long series of orderly plantations. Rubber, kapok, and cocoa trees grew right to the roadside, and the red fruit of dark-green coffee plants sparkled like cherries in the sunlight.

The road here was straight and well paved. The Dutch influence was still all around us, and, frequently, behind well-

trimmed hedges, we could see neat white bungalows. Roses framed the porches, and many of the families were breakfasting in the open. Some of the Dutch waved to us, happily oblivious of the fact that history was catching up with them. Holland lost her grip on the East Indies after World War II and rule reverted to the Indonesians.

The landscape changed as we entered Surakarta State. Flooded rice fields terraced the hillsides like great, curved, flashing mirrors. Water buffalo plodded across the fields, and behind them waded Javanese women, their dark-blue sarongs hiked up above their knees. By the roadside stood several oxcarts, and under the arched bamboo roofs lay a number of Javanese men, all sound asleep.

We climbed higher and higher, circling a volcano that left a powdery gray ash on our skin and clothes. Then we drove down into a broad valley. A winding river flowed through the middle, and at the far end, rose the minarets and sugar refinery chimneys of a large town. This was Solo.

We drove slowly through the streets, which had a dream-like tranquillity. The branches of tall trees seemed to float through the air, forming a green canopy over Poerwosarie Boulevard. In the residential area collonaded bungalows alternated with stately mansions. Well-dressed Dutch and Javanese sat on the verandas, shaded by fruit trees.

As we drove into the heart of town, we passed Indian shops draped with bright silks. A Chinese silversmith sat pensively smoking a pipe amid his display of gongs. From a Javanese coffee shop came the lazy hum of gossip. The smell of incense and native tobacco, seasoned with clove, hung sweetly in the air. There was little movement in the streets, and even the ponies drew their carriages in what seemed to be slow motion.

"What a dead town!" snorted Gus.

I quoted an old Javanese saying, "He who walks has time to think. He who hurries has sore feet."

Rooms had been reserved for us at the Dibbets Hotel, a cool structure of thick stone walls. After cleaning up and changing my clothes, I sought out the manager, a suave Eurasian.

"I have a letter of introduction to Prince Adipati," I told him. "Could you arrange to have it delivered for me?"

The Eurasian looked doubtful. "I don't know, sir. Prince Adipati is at his town residence, but he's very busy. The Susuhunan's birthday is tomorrow, and Prince Adipati is in

charge of the festivities here in town. It would be unwise to disturb him."

"It would be more unwise to leave him uninformed of my arrival," I declared, trying to sound imperious. "I am a diplomat from Latvia!"

My bluff worked. The Eurasian nearly fell over himself apologizing. "I'm sorry, sir—so sorry! I had no idea! I'll have your letter of introduction delivered immediately."

Less than an hour later Prince Adipati himself came to the hotel. He was tall for a Javanese, grandly dressed in royal gold cloth. He appeared somewhat agitated.

"My dear Baron," he said to me in Dutch, "why did you not let me know you were arriving? I could have arranged a proper reception."

"My visit is informal," I explained. "I wish only to pay my respects to the Susuhunan. Can an audience be arranged?"

"Oh, yes, of course." The prince hesitated, peering at me anxiously. "That is—well, it would depend on when you wished to see His Imperial Highness. You see, with the birthday celebrations and all—well—"

I realized then that, by a stroke of luck, I had landed in Solo at precisely the right time. Instead of checking too closely into my credentials, Prince Adipati was more concerned about having his carefully prepared arrangements upset by an unexpected guest. He obviously had no idea of just how important I was and, unless he could get my co-operation, was unprepared either to cram me on the royal guest list or leave me off. His large brown eyes gazed at me almost beseechingly.

"Oh, well," I said magnanimously, "there is no great hurry for the audience. The day after tomorrow would do fine."

The prince looked relieved. "Splendid! I am sure the Susuhunan will be delighted to receive you. Meanwhile, Baron, I shall arrange for you and your party to view tomorrow's parade from the special visitors' stand here at the hotel."

"Thank you."

We bowed to each other, and the prince left, followed by two attendants. One of the attendants, I noticed, lingered to speak to the hotel manager. The manager shrugged and shook his head and then, urged by the attendant, came over to me and apologetically said, "I beg your pardon, sir, but could you tell me where Latvia is?"

I tried to look indignant. "Why, it's one of the most important countries in Europe!"

"Oh, yes—of course!" The manager hurried back and told the royal attendant, who went off to inform Prince Adipati, who undoubtedly was waiting to pass on the information to the Susuhunan.

I smiled to myself, feeling very pleased. Sometimes it pays to come from a small country.

The special visitors' stand was set up on a balcony of the hotel, overlooking the route of the royal birthday procession. Blanche, Gus, and I had choice seats in the front row. Bunting and flowers were strung everywhere, even between tall coconut palms.

Thousands of Javanese lined the roadsides, all dressed up in their brightest sarongs and jackets. They gaily chattered among themselves until a few minutes before the parade was due to appear. Then a complete hush fell over the crowd, and only the chirruping of Java sparrows could be heard.

The approach of the procession was heralded by the clattering of horses' hooves. The horsemen, 20 Javanese noblemen in scarlet uniforms, rode by with lances held upright. They were followed by servants on foot carrying baskets of charcoal, bowls of water, and kettles of rice. Food was to be cooked and distributed to the people as a token gift from the emperor.

Then came more horsemen, uniformed bodyguards with drawn sabers who rode spirited Arab steeds. Behind them walked barefoot ladies of the court, slender beauties with shining honey-colored shoulders. Their sarongs were lifted high and tucked into belts, and their faces were dusted with yellow sandalwood powder. Each woman held a different object.

"What are they carrying?" Blanche asked me.

I didn't know, but a Dutch journalist, who sat on the other side of me, replied, "Personal belongings of the emperor, both symbolic and practical. He never leaves his palace without them."

These objects included a gold cigar case, a cushion stuffed with bird-of-paradise feathers, a silver tobacco box, an opium pipe, a gem-topped walking stick, a solid-gold spittoon, a jeweled betel nut box, a suitcase containing a change of clothes, a peacock feather fan, a gem-studded shield, a

sword, and a sly-looking little idol guaranteed to preserve sexual vigor.

The Hindu strain in the royal line was symbolized by the sacred images of two deities, Arjuna and Kali, carried between a golden cow and an ornate temple vessel. These were borne on palanquins by husky, bare-chested young Javanese and guarded by fiercely moustached pikemen.

Suddenly the thousands of Javanese spectators dropped to their knees and prostrated themselves in the dust.

"Here comes the emperor himself," said the Dutch journalist, respectfully rising.

We all stood up and bowed as the imperial coach rumbled past. It was gold in color and drawn by eight white stallions, all with ostrich plumes on their heads and red velvet covers on their backs. Each horse was led by a uniformed groom.

I peered into the coach at the massive outline of the emperor. He weighed more than 300 pounds and was literally covered with glory. Diamonds glittered all over his turban, which was set low on his forehead and partly obscured his face. I could see that it was a broad and bored face, however, and colored the same golden yellow as his imperial sarong.

The bulky potentate looked ageless, but I knew he was in his early sixties. His white military jacket, marked on the shoulders with the insignia of a general, was decorated with colorful awards, jeweled stars, and the broad ribbon of the Dutch Orange Nassau order. A fat, languid brown hand dropped silver out the coach window.

The prostrate Javanese did not stir until the imperial carriage had rolled past. Then there was a scramble for the coins, despite the coaches that were still lumbering by. In these coaches sat princes of the royal blood, wearing tall lacquered hats and gem-studded *krises*. I recognized Prince Adipati, dressed in a gala uniform and reclining in his carriage.

Behind the coaches rode more horsemen, the personal attendants of the princes. Then came five caparisoned elephants, their foreheads painted with red designs similar to Hindu caste marks. Costly gold brocade and precious stones covered the backs of the huge beasts. One, the biggest of all, gave the solemn procession some comedy relief by sucking up dust in his trunk and blowing it at the laughing spectators.

More carriages now appeared, all painted royal gold but

with the curtains closely drawn. All that could be seen was an occasional pair of dark eyes peering out.

"The imperial harem," the Dutch journalist explained.

His words were shattered by an abrupt crash of martial music. A military band blared past, followed by marching soldiers, civil servants, minor officials, and pensioners. The dust raised by the thousands of stomping feet was too much. Most of the people in the stand around us began to leave.

Blanche, Gus, and I followed the general movement into the hotel, where Blanche gave a soft whistle and said, "Whew! What a show!"

I nodded, feeling more pleased than ever. Any potentate who could put on a display of Oriental splendor such as we had seen, I felt sure, must possess an *Agni Mani*. All I had to do was figure out a way to see it.

CHAPTER XV

The morning after the royal procession I received a note from Prince Adipati, inviting Blanche, Gus, and myself to have lunch at his town residence. This turned out to be a large house, rather ordinary-looking on the outside but filled with Oriental art treasures. Ornamental daggers, swords, and tapestries hung on the walls, and blackwood tables and shelves held a great variety of vases, jars, and silverware.

Several striking stone statues caught my attention.

"Those are idols from the Prambanan temple," Prince Adipati explained. "The ancient temple is in ruins now, but it was once one of the richest structures of its kind in the world. It's only about forty miles away. I can obtain permission for you to visit it if you like."

"I'd like it very much," I said—although at that moment I was more interested in hearing whether or not I was going to see the emperor. As soon as I could politely do so, I asked the prince if an audience had been arranged.

"Oh, of course," he replied. "I'm to take you to the palace at four o'clock, after the heat of the day."

We had lunch in the garden, and Prince Adipati told us

stories about the emperor. His Imperial Highness was absolute sovereign over the 10,000 inhabitants of the *kraton*, a citadel which surrounded his palace. Anyone who displeased him was brought before the *aloon-aloon*, a palace forum where the emperor sat in judgment and punishment was carried out on the spot by an executioner of the Kalang caste, the aborigines of Java. Ten strokes with a lash made of buffalo hide was the mildest sentence.

"Such severity is necessary," Prince Adipati went on. "There is much palace intrigue and jealousy. Courtiers and harem inmates sometimes try to stab or poison each other. The emperor must keep order. He has a great responsibility."

Nevertheless, it seemed, the supreme ruler had his lighter moments. In his youth he had enjoyed abducting pretty village girls for his harem. In later years he had turned to practical jokes. Once, after being fitted with a set of false teeth—a Western innovation then virtually unknown in Java—he had returned to his palace and ordered the guard lined up before him. The playful potentate had then taken out his dentures and snapped them at the troops, many of whom fell over in a dead faint.

Prince Adipati smiled and added, "But do not get the wrong impression about the emperor. In his own way he is kind and generous. He hands out many gifts and, if he likes a visitor, grants any reasonable wish that might be made."

Up to this point I had been undecided how to make my request to see the *Agni Mani*. I had been thinking of enlisting the aid of Prince Adipati, but I now decided against this. If my request was passed on by a second party to the emperor, he might have time to get suspicious—or worse. My best bet, I realized, was to make myself so welcome that my wish to see the *Agni Mani* would be granted.

Back at the hotel, I told Blanche and Gus, "When we enter the palace this afternoon, we're going to be the most likable visitors ever to set foot in the place. The emperor is vain—he likes flattery. All right, flatter the life out of him!"

I turned to Blanche and told her, "If you've ever dazzled a man, do it this afternoon. Put on your best dress and smile your brightest for the emperor. He may be fat and old, but I believe he still has an eye for a beautiful woman. Charm him."

Blanche grinned and gave a little shrug. "I may wind up in a harem yet!"

Prince Adipati called for us in his coach. He was wearing a tall lacquered hat, a golden sarong and black velvet jacket. Sightseers gathered around the hotel entrance and stared at Blanche, Gus, and me as we climbed into the royal carriage.

We were all too excited to say much, and even Prince Adipati seemed a little nervous. It was only after we had rolled through a gateway into the *kraton* that he relaxed and pointed out places of interest to us. The walled citadel covered five square miles and formed a self-contained imperial community.

There was a strangely Roman air about the place. Next to the *aloon-aloon*, the square forum, stood a large public reception hall, open on three sides, with a tiled roof supported by marble columns. Nearby towered the Great Mosque, its glazed blue tiles reflecting in the holy water of a marble pool. In the background loomed the battlements of the palace. On the high walls I could see a domed watch tower and several ancient cannon.

We passed through narrow streets lined with open shops where swordsmiths and weavers sat at work. In a small square, near the stable where the imperial horses and elephants were kept, our carriage stopped and we all got out. Adipati pointed out the garages, which accommodated scores of cars. Alongside were the coach houses, crammed with more than 150 royal carriages.

As we walked toward the palace, I noticed two adjacent buildings. These were the treasury and the armory, Adipati told me. Both were made of massive slabs of volcanic stone.

The palace was surrounded by a high double enclosure. At the main entrance two sentries snapped to attention as Adipati led us into the *pandapa*, a great domed chamber where state receptions were held.

The prince could not resist turning on the electric lights, which had recently been installed. Five huge cut-glass chandeliers burst into light, and Blanche gasped at the grandeur of the room. A red plush throne, with golden tassels and ivory legs, stood on a dais. On the wall over it was a gold replica of the imperial crown. The walls and ceiling of the entire chamber were lined with richly carved woodwork, all covered with shimmering gold leaf.

"One square mile of gold leaf was used to decorate the interior of the palace," Adipati proudly informed us.

One of several uniformed attendants moved close to the prince and whispered something.

"His Imperial Highness is in the teahouse," Adipati told us. "We can go in now."

We followed him through a narrow, carpeted passage, out into a palm-lined patio and up the marble steps of an open pavilion. This was the royal teahouse. We removed our shoes and entered. Deep-piled Persian rugs lay spread on the mosaic floor, and brocaded cushions were strewn everywhere. The manner of sitting, it seemed, was to squat on a rug and lean against the cushions.

The emperor himself lolled in a corner, his silk-swathed bulk supported by a velvet bolster. He was surrounded by courtiers, attendants, and servants. Up close, the potentate appeared as big and fearsome as a prehistoric monster. His breathing was heavy and audible, and his left eyelid hung low in a weird, perpetual wink. The other eye, dark and surly, surveyed us suspiciously.

Adipati had prostrated himself before the emperor. Gus and I bowed deeply, and Blanche curtsied. We were rewarded with a moody nod from His Imperial Highness. Adipati then gestured for us to be seated.

As we settled ourselves on rugs, I surreptitiously studied the emperor. He wore a fierce gray moustache, which stood out against his dark skin. His thick nostrils distended and contracted with his heavy breathing, and the diamond buttons on his bulging tunic scintillated at each rise and fall of his belly. He was chewing betel nut, and the red juice dripped over his pouting lower lip.

A young female attendant, bare to the waist, squatted behind the potentate, slowly swinging a large peacock fan. Another girl hovered near the sovereign, alertly holding a gold spittoon. She was apparently new at her job, however, or perhaps overanxious. When the emperor suddenly spat, the girl missed the great red gob that went flying through the air. It smacked onto the mosaic floor and left a long, sliding smear of crimson. Still another girl, equipped with a cloth for such emergencies, darted forward and quickly wiped up the stain.

We were all seated now, and an awkward silence ensued. Overhead, I could hear the prisms of a cut-glass chandelier tinkling in the light breeze. I glanced at Adipati. He nodded encouragingly, and I said in Dutch, "Please tell His Imperial

Highness that I bring respects and best wishes from my country. Tell him that word of his fame and glory has spread all over Europe."

The prince translated this for the emperor, who nodded and looked at me as though I might not be such an idiot, after all. I quickly went on, "Tell His Imperial Highness that all the great things I have heard about him are indeed true. I have traveled far and wide, but never have I been so impressed by the power and splendor of a sovereign. His Imperial Highness may well be the greatest, most supreme and absolute ruler in the world today."

When the emperor had swallowed all this, he seemed to soften into an enormous, purring cat, tremendously pleased with me, himself, and everyone around us. He grinned, dribbled betel nut juice, and emphatically nodded, as much as to say, "That's all very true. Now let's hear some more!"

I gave it to him. Blanche and Gus joined me in the outrageous flattery, and the sovereign was soon chuckling and laughing. He roared over a joke Gus told and, with elephantine coyness, flirted with Blanche. By the time tea was over, the emperor looked on us with beaming goodwill.

"It is my practice to grant favored visitors a wish," he told us through Adipati. "What is your desire?"

This was the crucial moment. I said quickly, before I might lose my nerve, "To see the imperial fire pearl."

For a moment Adipati just stared at me, silently demanding, "What are you saying!"

"Go on!" I ordered him sharply. "Tell His Highness!"

Fearfully, half mumbling, the prince translated my request. The emperor abruptly lost all his good nature. He lurched up from his bolster, for all the world like an angry whale trying to leap out of the water. His left eyelid drooped lower than ever, and his other eye glared at me. I had a quick mental picture of myself being hung up in the *aloon-aloon* and lashed with a buffalo whip. I literally held my breath.

The sovereign finally spoke in a low, ominous voice, and Adipati said to me, "His Imperial Highness wants to know how you come to know of his fire pearl."

"Tell him his fame has spread far and wide, and it is only natural that the fame of his most precious possession should also spread."

This was relayed to the emperor, who still glared at me.

He spoke again, and Adipati said, "His Imperial Highness wants to know why you wish to see the fire pearl."

"Because I have seen and verified that the great glory of the emperor is true. I wish to see for myself if the glory of his fire pearl is likewise true."

As Adipati translated, I watched the potentate closely. My explanations must have satisfied him, for he leaned back against his bolster, nodded, and said something to Adipati.

The prince looked relieved when he turned and told me, "His Imperial Highness will grant your wish. However, only he is permitted to open the vault where the fire pearl is kept, and you must wait until he is ready to go into the treasure house. In the meantime, if you wish, I can show you around the palace."

I decided this was better than sitting in front of the unpredictable emperor. Blanche, Gus, and I thanked our burly host for his hospitality, bowed our way out of his august presence, put on our shoes, and followed Adipati on a tour of the palace grounds.

The prince pointed out the *gedoeng koening*, the emperor's private residence, and, next to it, the *dalem*, housing his favorite lady of the moment. The rest of his harem lived in white dwellings set amid the trees and shrubbery of a walled park. No male except the emperor was allowed to enter here. Through a grilled iron gate we could see white cranes and peacocks strutting around ponds and temples.

We passed scores of gardeners, maids, and attendants. More than a thousand servants were in daily attendance at the palace, Adipati told us, and this number was trebled on festive occasions.

After wandering through a private audience chamber hung with large ancestral paintings, we finally entered the treasury. This was a vast, dark building, divided into numerous heavy-doored rooms. Objects of incalculable value lay piled about like junk in a warehouse. There were mounds of gold plate, silver jugs, and jewel-encrusted elephant howdahs. Dusty old teakwood chests were loaded with necklaces, rings, and ancient gold coins. Hemp bags bulged with gems of all kinds, both cut and uncut.

Blanche and Gus were dazzled by this display of riches, but, curiously, I felt only a mingled sense of boredom and irritation. Wealth without use, it seemed to me, was like

people without purpose. Both lacked meaning and, possibly, morality.

"Where did all this stuff come from?" I asked Adipati.

"It is the accumulation of centuries of worship tokens presented to the emperors of this line. Since Hindu times it has been the custom to present prayer-gifts of great value to potentates and priests. These treasures are the property of the gods, not man. When one is uncovered, as occasionally happens when Dutch archaeologists excavate ancient temple ruins, it must be turned over to the spiritual ruler of that area. Otherwise, the finder will be doomed by the gods."

I wasn't particularly interested. I was too impatient to see the *Agni Mani*. Finally, as we were standing before the conical-shaped imperial crown, a guard arrived with word that the emperor had just entered the treasury. Adipati quickly led us down a dim passageway to a small room, which seemed to be filling with guards. Actually, there were only half a dozen. They moved into position on each side of a vault door, then stood at attention as the emperor loomed out of the shadows and waddled between them.

Adipati motioned to us, and we followed the potentate. He paid no attention to us until he began to unlock the spike-studded vault door. Then, as he slowly turned each of five heavy keys, he glanced at us, his one visible eye gleaming brighter and brighter. For me, the suspense built up almost to an impossible pitch. My heart beat faster and faster. When the door eventually swung open, I wanted to brush the emperor aside and rush into the vault.

Instead, I stood stock-still, staring into what appeared to be a small chapel. On an altar-like dais, under a soft spotlight, lay swathes of pure white silk. Set in the center was a platinum container. In this, dramatically caught in the spotlight, glowed an intense black stone—the *Agni Mani*.

Suddenly I felt calm, at peace. I had long searched for what many people had told me was a myth. I had believed. I had persevered. Now the object of my search lay before me, darkly aglow with mystic life. It was real, it was true. My odyssey, my faith, my persistence had all been justified.

Adipati took my elbow, and, almost in a trance, I moved into the vault and stood before the fire pearl. I could clearly see its strange, glossy grooves. Around the edges licked subtle, almost unseen tongues of green flame.

"May I touch it?" I whispered.

There was a murmur of voices, then Adipati said, "Yes, but make a wish. It will come true."

As though in a dream, I saw my hand move into the light and descend on the *Agni Mani*. My arm, my fingers seemed to be all nerves. If my hand had burst into green flames, I would not have been surprised. Instead, as my forefinger touched the stone, I felt only a slight tingle, as though I—or my imagination—had contacted some miniature, magical charge of electricity.

Then I saw other hands passing through the light—Blanche's, Gus's—and, still in a dream-like state, we all moved out of the vault, thanked the emperor, and left the palace.

It was not until we were in Adipati's coach and nearly back at the hotel that I returned completely to reality. Blanche was gazing at me quizzically, and I realized she had spoken to me.

"What?" I said.

She repeated her question. "What will you do now?"

I didn't know—or at least I didn't know how to answer the question. I had achieved a goal, but, along with my sense of satisfaction, was a paradoxical feeling of emptiness, aimlessness. For years I had known exactly what I wanted to do. Now I didn't. Life, it seemed, was a series of goals. When one was reached, another had to be set.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," I told Blanche, "but when I touched the *Agni Mani*, I wished for a fire pearl of my own. Perhaps I'll go on looking for one."

Blanche seemed disappointed, then annoyed. "Is that the best you could wish for—a stone?"

I looked at her. "What did you wish for—love?"

"I didn't wish for anything. I don't believe in that nonsense!"

Gus spoke up. "I wished for a lot of money. Then Blanche and I can get married and go back to Europe and live happily ever after!"

It seemed as good a wish as any.

CHAPTER XVI

We stayed in Solo two more days. Blanche and Gus went sight-seeing together, and I spent much of my time with Prince Adipati. One night, in his garden, we sat watching a full moon rise above the jasmine trees. In the unearthly light, Adipati's solemn face seemed to be made of bronze.

We had spoken much about the *Agni Mani*, and now I asked him, "Do you know where the emperor's fire pearl was found?"

The prince shook his head. "Not exactly. There is a belief that when the Hindu god Arjuna shot his arrows, one fell into the Java Sea. The few fire pearls known to have been found are supposed to be pieces of his arrowhead. This is religious symbolism, of course, since astrologers tell us that fire pearls actually fell to earth from the moon."

"But it would seem that they really were recovered from the Java Sea."

"Or an island." The prince smiled at me, sympathetically and a little sadly, for he knew what was on my mind. "And there are thousands of islands in the Java Sea. . . ."

Restlessly I got up and climbed to a platform above the garden pavilion where we had been sitting. Adipati followed me. From our vantage point we could see the stark, leprous outline of mountains along the horizon. It looked like a lunar landscape, except that one conical crest seemed to be on fire.

"*Gunung Merapi*, the Red Fire Mountain, is ready to erupt again," said Adipati, quite matter-of-factly. "Two villages were evacuated yesterday, and lava has already begun to pour down the sides of the volcano. The gods are angry about something."

We watched in silence as a scarlet column shot from the crater and scattered fiery fragments across the dark sky.

Smoke was still trailing from the Red Fire Mountain the next morning when we left Solo. We drove off in a long black Packard, the imperial crest inscribed on the front doors. This royal transportation, along with a uniformed driver, had

been obtained for us by Adipati. He had also mapped out an itinerary for us. We were to drive to the ruins of Prambanan, then go on to Jogjakarta, where we could catch a train for Semarang.

The road out of Solo was dusty, and the air was clouded with volcanic ash. A gray patina clung to the tamarind trees along the roadside. We all wore sunglasses to protect our eyes, and Blanche had a scarf tied about her head.

"I'll be glad to get back to the *Yongmin*," she once remarked. "There's no dust at sea."

I absently nodded, preoccupied with my own thoughts. Back to the *Yongmin*, back to sea, back to Singapore. Then what? How did one go about making a systematic search of thousands of islands? How did one live long enough for such a search?

I was perturbed by other questions. Was I to go on forever changing one compulsion for another? Was life—or at least my life—no more than a series of obsessions? Was the span of existence too short to be split into a succession of goals?

Troubled by my own doubts, I gazed at the countryside. We had climbed higher into the hills, and the volcanic ash was not so thick here. Vast fields of sugarcane spread down into the plains like a rolling green ocean.

Incongruously, a small locomotive puffed out of the ocean, hauling cars loaded with cane. Javanese workers riding on the cars bowed to us—or, rather, to the imperial crests on the Packard. Gus solemnly bowed back.

We left the cane fields behind and climbed a series of rugged hills. The narrow, rutted road twisted and turned, sometimes compelling the driver to drop to low gear. It was almost noon when we reached the ruins of Prambanan. The ancient temple, half collapsed, stood on a rise well above the road.

The driver stayed with the car, while Blanche, Gus, and I climbed a path leading to the ruins. A barbed-wire fence surrounded the temple, and an old Javanese caretaker stood at the gate, smiling and bowing as we approached.

"I cannot allow you to enter," he apologetically said in Dutch. "You must have imperial permission."

I showed him our permit, signed by Prince Adipati, and the caretaker quickly unlocked the gate.

"Would you like me to show you around?" he asked.

"No," I told him, "we'll be all right."

"If there is any information you wish, I shall be pleased to supply it. I know all about the temple."

"How old is it?"

"More than a thousand years." The old man's voice lowered to a whisper. "Yet the gods were here only last night. I could hear them heaving the great stones about."

"That was the volcano," I said. "You can hear it rumbling from afar."

* The caretaker shook his head. "No, it was the gods. This morning I could see where they had moved some of the stones."

Blanche held up a lunch hamper. "Ask him if we can eat in the grounds."

"Of course! Of course!" replied the old man, bowing us through the gate.

We continued on up the path toward the temple. The main section capped the hill like a great, battered gray helmet. Blanche pointed to some trees off to one side. "We can have lunch over there. Gus, come and help me."

I went on to the temple alone. There wasn't much to see. The once magnificent edifice had fallen in places under its own weight, scattering huge stone blocks over the grounds. The volcanic stone of the structure still standing had partly decomposed, but by clambering atop a pile of blocks, I could make out some of the faded carvings. There was a triumphant elephant procession, an ancient Hindu sailing vessel ploughing through waves, and a scene showing opposing armies locked in combat.

Blanche called to me then, and I joined her and Gus for lunch. Afterward Gus wanted to lie in the shade for a nap, but Blanche insisted that he and I pose for some pictures.

"The ruins will make a wonderful background," she said. "We'll go right up to that highest point there."

We climbed some steep steps leading to a terrace, which was on the same level as the entrance to the *stupa*, the dark, forbidding-looking inner sanctum. Blanche posed Gus and me before the high, narrow stone entrance, then stepped back and began snapping pictures.

She was a painstaking photographer, with a fancy for angle shots. She crouched, bent, and even climbed onto stone blocks for unusual effects. There was no volcanic ash in the air now, and the afternoon sun was blazing into the eyes of Gus and myself. We both began to get impatient.

"Come on, Blanche," I finally complained. "I'd like to look at the temple, not your camera."

"Just one more," insisted Blanche, crouching low for a final shot. Instead of clicking the shutter, however, she frowned and looked up.

"Now what is it?" I asked her, exasperated.

Blanche pointed into the gloomy interior of the sanctum. "There's something shining in there. I can only see it when I'm crouching down like this."

I glanced over my shoulder. I couldn't see anything shining.

"Come here," Blanche urged me. "Look from here."

I went to where she was crouching and bent down beside her.

"There!" said Blanche, pointing. "See it?"

Sure enough, in the dark depths of the sanctum, I could see a sliver of sharp light. Something small but intensely bright seemed to be reflecting the slanting afternoon sunlight.

"Don't move from that spot," I told Blanche. "See if you can direct me to the point where the light is coming from."

"Be careful!" Blanche warned me as I hurried toward the sanctum. "The inside of that temple doesn't look very safe. It could come crashing down at any minute."

"It's stood for a thousand years," I called back over my shoulder. "It should stand for a few more minutes."

Nevertheless, I entered the sanctum cautiously. The interior was dank and dark, shrouded in the ages. It smelled of bats and must and ancient incense.

"What's up?" Gus asked, following behind me.

"I don't know," I said. "Blanche saw something strange in here. Maybe it's nothing."

I looked back. Blanche motioned for me to go forward and to the left. I went past the crumbled remains of an altar. The gloom intensified, and I scraped my feet carefully over the stone-cluttered floor, holding my hands before me. Something fluttered overhead, and Gus swore, "Damn! What's that?"

My own nerves were drawing tight. "Only a bat, you fool! Shut up!"

I was up against a wall now. The stone felt cold and clammy on the palms of my hands. Again I looked back. Blanche had left her observation point and was running toward the temple.

"You're right under it!" she called as she hurried into the

sanctum, and her breathless voice echoed hollowly in the dim chamber. It's about four feet above your head! Stand right there!"

"Light a match," I told Gus. "Let's see what this wall's like."

Gus struck a match, and in the feeble light I studied the wall. It was made of stone blocks, but they were fitted too smoothly to climb. There was no place for a handgrip or a toehold.

Blanche came up behind me, her voice eager. "Stay right where you are, Richard! Gus and I will get something for you to stand on!"

"There's nothing around here but heavy stone blocks," I told her impatiently. "You couldn't lift them. Take your shoes off and get up on my shoulders. Gus, give her a hand."

Gus dropped the match, and the gray temple shadows closed over us again. We were all excited, without really knowing why. Blanche slipped a couple of times as she climbed up my back, and Gus and I had to grab her. She finally settled herself on my shoulders, with a knee on each side of my head. Her skirt, stretched behind my head, gave her added support. I held to her legs and Gus lit another match.

"Well?" I called to Blanche. "Can you see anything?"

"Not much. There's a kind of ledge up here and it's covered with dirt and bits of stone. I'll have to brush it away."

A dusty tumble of debris came down past my face, causing me to blink and sputter, "Hey, watch out!"

"I can't help it!" Blanche's voice grew more excited. "I've found where that light was coming from! There's a small stone that's been shaken loose here! There's something inside!"

"Well, what?"

"I don't know. The stone is stuck. I'll need a knife or something to pry it loose."

Gus had a pocketknife. He dropped the match, took out the knife, opened the largest blade, and handed it up to Blanche.

"There's a cigarette lighter in my pocket," I told him. "Take it out and light it. It's better than matches."

Gus found the lighter, snapped it on and held it up. The uncertain illumination cast rippling silhouettes along the wall. Above me, I could hear the scrape of the knife, and

Blanche's knees dug into my shoulders as she increased her exertions.

"How's it coming?" I asked.

"Fine, fine! The mortar's coming out in chunks."

Bits of the mortar plunked past me. I felt the muscles of Blanche's thighs grow taut, and her body jerked. "There! The stone's loose! Stand back, Richard! I don't want it to come down on your head!"

A little unsteadily, I stepped back from the wall. Blanche leaned forward, causing her skirt to press tightly against the back of my head. She grunted, and I could hear the crunch of the stone moving. Then, with startling suddenness, it plunged past my face and crashed to the floor. Taken by surprise, I staggered backward, holding desperately to Blanche's legs. She grabbed my head. "Richard, don't fall!"

"I'm all right." I regained my balance and moved close to the wall again. "Can you see now? What's up there?"

Blanche didn't answer my question. She simply exclaimed in French, "My God! My God!" I could feel her knees trembling with excitement, and, without warning, she started to stand up on my shoulders. Neither of us was quite acrobatic enough for this maneuver. I nearly lost my balance, Blanche slipped and half fell, and her skirt came down over my head, completely blinding me. We would both have fallen if Gus had not steadied us.

Somehow, I got Blanche's skirt off my head and yelled at her, "What the hell are you doing up there?"

"My God! My God!" was all she could say. She had hold of the ledge with one hand and was pulling at something with the other.

"Blanche!" I shouted. "Answer me! What's up there?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you! I don't believe it myself! My God! My God!" Blanche was scooping out something with both hands now. "Watch your head, Richard!"

I ducked as a glittering rain began to fall. In utter astonishment I stared at the rich raindrops bouncing about my feet—rings, jewels, coins, bangles, necklaces, gem-studded images. Gus was down on his knees, frantically gathering the treasure into a pile and exclaiming, "It can't be true! It can't be true!"

But it was. Blanche finally scraped the last of the loot from the cache in the wall. She slid from my shoulders, and we all

kneeled on the floor, staring at the gleaming hoard, literally hypnotized by it.

Our amazement had solidified into a kind of shock. For a few moments we were too stunned even to speak. The shadowy flicker of the cigarette lighter drew out rather than concealed the raw emotions that had been pulled to our very nerve ends. Our faces were like primitive masks, the eyes reflecting the glitter of the gold and jewels heaped before us.

Gus was the first to speak, and his voice was strangely harsh. "I should get half of this treasure! *I* wished for it!"

I stared at him. In the eerie light and shadow his face looked oddly distorted. An unreasoning anger surged up in me. "What the hell are you talking about—*you* wished for it!"

"I did! When I touched the fire pearl, I wished for wealth!"

"But I found it!" Blanche moved between us, leaning over the treasure. "I spotted that light in the temple!"

I looked at her, hardly recognizing the grim, dark outline of her jaw. What had happened to gay, considerate Blanche, the woman I might have loved? What had happened to laughing, charming Gus, my lifelong friend? For some time they had been fading away from me, left behind in my intense pursuit of the *Agni Mani*. Now they were hostile strangers, glaring at me.

My anger erupted again. "Listen, you two would be still sitting around Singapore if it weren't for me! Who brought you here? Me! Why—" I choked on my own rage. As I caught my breath, I noticed a glint of animal-like cunning in Gus's eyes. His knife was lying on the floor near him, and I was sure he was going to grab it. I beat him to it, snatching up the knife and snarling, "Oh, no, you don't!"

My own voice sounded strange to me. It had undertones of savagery—and then I realized the truth. I had been infected by the same shadowy evil I had seen reflected in Blanche and Gus. Sudden riches had brought out the avarice in all of us.

Appalled, I dropped the knife. The clatter on the stone floor seemed to bring us all back to our senses. Blanche buried her face in her hands and moaned, "Oh, my God, what are we doing?" At the same time Gus and I blurted, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean—"

Then we were all apologizing to one another. Blanche alternately laughed and sobbed over the near escape we'd had from the violence of greed. "Oh, my God, what fools people can make of themselves!" she kept saying.

Gus had completely changed his attitude, too. "I didn't really believe my wish had come true," he disclaimed. "It's just a coincidence. I don't deserve any of the treasure at all."

"Don't be silly," I told him. "Blanche actually found the treasure, but we helped her uncover it. Therefore, I think she should get half, and the other half should be split between you and me, Gus. How's that?"

"Fine," said Gus, but Blanche protested, "No, that's not fair to you boys. We should all share equally."

Now we were all trying to be generous with one another. The absurdity of the situation made me laugh. "Listen, you two—let's stop squabbling and decide what we're going to do with this stuff. It may not be so easy to get it out of the country. There's some kind of law that says you have to turn finds like this over to the authorities." A sudden thought occurred to me, and I glanced at Blanche. "Unless you want to turn it over to the authorities. It's your find."

Blanche hesitated just a moment, then gave one of her impish grins. "Finder's keepers! We found it—let's keep it!"

That settled that. I sent Gus for the lunch hamper, and we stuffed the treasure inside. It was a large hamper, strongly made of wicker, but it barely held all the loot. The total weight, mostly in gold, was about 80 pounds.

It was no easy job to carry such a heavy load and look unconcerned. Gus lugged it out the gate and I carried it the rest of the way to the car. Neither the caretaker nor the driver appeared to notice anything unusual—although, to me, it seemed that Blanche, Gus, and I were all flushed and sweating with secret guilt. We stowed the hamper in the back seat, securely held beneath our legs, and set off for Jogjakarta.

It was dusk now, and behind us I could hear the ominous rumble of the Red Fire Mountain. I recalled something that Prince Adipati had told me: that anyone who found a temple treasure and failed to turn it over to the spiritual leader of the area would be "doomed by the gods."

At Jogjakarta we were lucky to obtain a train compartment to ourselves. As soon as the train pulled out of the station, we quickly drew the blinds, lifted the hamper onto the table and opened it. In the soft light of the compartment, gently swaying with the movement of the train, the revealed treasure glowed, sparkled and glittered. The rings, neck-

laces, bangles, coins, and idols were thickly made of solid gold, some encrusted with chunky jewels. I identified diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, all cut in the round cabochon fashion of ancient times.

"How much is it worth, Richard?" whispered Gus.

"At least a hundred thousand American dollars." This was a huge sum in those days, and it awed us into silence. I picked up some of the coins and studied them. I could not decipher their inscriptions, but I was certain they were a thousand years old.

"I was speaking only of the value of the gold and gems if they were melted down and separated," I went on. "From an historical or archaeological standpoint, some of these objects are priceless."

Blanche and Gus were now picking over the riches. Blanche put what looked like a ruby tiara on her head and admired the effect in a hand mirror. Gus held up a sinister-looking little idol that had emeralds for eyes.

"How about splitting up the treasure right now?" he suggested. "Blanche can have first pick. We can put our shares in our own suitcases."

This seemed like a good idea, and we spent most of the trip to Semarang making our choices. We tied our shares in towels and stuffed them into our suitcases. Then, feeling very pleased with ourselves, we sat grinning at each other.

"How do you suppose we just happened to be in the right place at the right time to spot that light from the temple?" Blanche remarked.

I'd been thinking about this. I said, "I once read something on how Hindu priests used to mark places where treasure was hidden by an ingenious method of catching a ray of sunlight, even in a dark place. Only the priests knew exactly where to stand and spot the light at a precise point in the sun's descent. That's what you may have done, Blanche, in crouching down to take your picture."

Blanche laughed. "Thank God I'm a fussy photographer!"

"On the other hand," I went on, "the stone blocking the cache had been shaken loose by centuries of earthquakes. The rumbling of the Red Fire Mountain last night might have been just enough to split open a thin crack, revealing the sparkle of the jewels inside. That sliver of light may not have been intentional at all."

"Who cares," said Gus, "as long as we found the treasure!"

That about summed up the whole amazing incident.

At Semarang we hired a launch and went out to the *Yong-min*. The ship was loaded with coffee beans and ready to sail. An hour later we put to sea.

CHAPTER XVII

I awoke to the gentle roll of the ship. A ray of sunshine slanted through the porthole, filling the cabin with golden haze. For a moment, halfway between sleeping and waking, I thought I was emerging from a dream. It had been so pleasant. Blanche and Gus and I had found a hidden fortune in a temple. . . .

No! I sat up, the events of the previous day flooding back to me. It was no dream—it was real! We *had* found a fortune!

I scrambled out of bed, pulled my suitcase from beneath the bunk, unlocked it, and tore open the towel wadded inside. Yes, there it lay—a fortune in gold and gems! I sank back on my haunches, a warm glow of relief, joy, and excitement spreading through me. . . .

Someone knocked on the door. Hastily, almost frantically, I closed and locked the suitcase and shoved it back under the bunk. "Yes?"

It was Lagendijk. "I'd like you to take a look at the cargo."

"I'll be right out." I quickly pulled on trousers and shirt, unlocked my cabin door, and joined Lagendijk. The big Dutchman was moodily regarding bags of coffee beans that had been piled on deck.

"What's the trouble?" I asked him.

The captain nodded toward the bags. "I don't like this. We're way overloaded. There are twenty tons of beans here on deck."

"Wasn't there room enough in the holds?"

"No, and the agent said you'd okayed the overload."

"That's right," I admitted. "I figured it wouldn't matter much. It's only a short run to Singapore. Besides, the weather's fine."

The captain glanced at the clear blue sky. "Let's hope it stays fine." He hunched his shoulders and wandered off.

I looked into the saloon for Blanche and Gus, but they were

nowhere to be seen. I then went to Gus's cabin and knocked on the door. His voice came, quick and suspicious. "Yes, who is it?"

"Richard."

Gus unlocked the door, opened it a crack, and made sure it was I before letting me in. His share of the treasure was spread on the bunk, and he had a cloth in his hand.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Polishing my jewelry. I want to get the best price for it."

I had to smile. "Put it away. I think we'd better have a conference with Blanche."

Blanche, too, had her door locked. When she let us in, she was wearing a ruby necklace that looked like a splash of blood. Her eyes matched the sparkle of the gems.

"I couldn't sleep," she admitted. "I kept getting up all night, making sure my jewelry was all right and trying some of it on. It's too beautiful to sell. I think I'll keep most of it."

"Not me," said Gus. "I want the cash!" He put his arm around Blanche. "Remember my wish? I wanted wealth so we could get married and go back to Europe and live happily ever after! Well, I've got the wealth—now we'll get married!"

Blanche glanced inquiringly at me. "What are you going to do, Richard?"

This, I knew, was my last chance to win Blanche—if I wanted to win her. Desirable as she was, I had left her before to pursue the *Agni Mani*. If I had truly loved her, would I have done that? I didn't know.

I didn't know, either, whether I wanted to clash with Gus in a contest over Blanche. I only knew that it vaguely irritated me to see that she made no move to disengage herself from his arm—or perhaps, male-like, I was only seeking vindication for the decision I knew I must make.

In a mingle of sadness and annoyance, I said, "I told you of my wish—that I want to find a fire pearl of my own. I'll sell my share of the treasure and use the money for such a search."

Blanche nodded, a little sadly, a little resignedly, yet firmly, as though glad that a decision had finally been reached.

"All right," she told Gus, "we'll get married as soon as you want. . . ."

I lay on my bunk, looking at the porthole. The sun had

disappeared, and because we were loaded to the waterline, an occasional wave smeared the thick glass of the porthole with transparent green. The sea was rising.

The air in the cabin was still and oppressive. Feeling uneasy, I got up and went on deck. It reassured me to see Blanche and Gus playing deck tennis.

Up on the bridge, Lagendijk was thoughtfully puffing his pipe.

"How's the weather look to you?" I asked.

"Not so good. The wind has changed to the northwest. I expect it to increase. We'll probably have rain, too."

He was right. During lunch the sea grew rougher and rougher. We swayed in our chairs to the wallowing of the ship. The saloon windows facing the foredeck were smacked with foam whenever the bow dipped into an oncoming swell.

"I don't feel so good," said Gus, holding a napkin to his mouth. He looked a bit green.

"Better go lie down," I told him. "You, too, Blanche. We're in for a bad storm."

I was really worried now. I pulled on oilskins and staggered up to the bridge. Lagendijk's pipe was grimly clamped in his jaws. We were about 200 miles northeast of Java, he told me, and headed toward the Mana Ada Islands. McRae, the engineer, had put on full speed to get us into the protective lee of the islands.

I stayed on the bridge all afternoon. Once Lagendijk nudged me and pointed ahead. A dark curtain of rain was racing toward us, driven by the strong wind. It hit the *Yongmin* with a roar, lashing the windows and sharply reducing visibility.

The overloaded ship was now ploughing into every wave. The decks were constantly awash, and sometimes I felt as though I were standing on the conning tower of a submarine. Crest after crest broke over the forecastle and foamed past us in swirls of angry white and green. The laboring *Yongmin* creaked and groaned.

I stumbled over to Lagendijk and bawled, "Would it help any if we got rid of those beans on deck?"

He nodded. "It might. I'll check the barometer." His raincoat billowed in the wind as he made for the charthouse. He soon came lurching back. "Still falling! We'll have to dump the deck load!"

This was no easy task. Fourteen men, including myself

and help from the engine room, struggled for three hours, dragging the 150-pound bags to the railing and heaving them overboard. Time after time, one or another of us nearly went over with the beans. The flooded deck was literally part of the raging sea, and our oilskins streamed with spray and rain. The wind whipped us unmercifully.

When I finally battled my way back to the bridge, my face felt raw and sore. Water swilled ankle-deep over the deck-boards of the bridge. Unexpectedly, a cross-wave crashed aboard amidship, nearly wrenching the *Yongmin* in two. When the spray cleared, I saw that a section of the railing had been ripped away. A lifeboat had been snatched loose, too, and I caught a glimpse of it tossing, bottom up, in the furious sea. Then it disappeared.

I glanced at Lagendijk. He shook his head. I had never seen him look so worried.

Nightfall brought no relief. On the contrary, the waves grew mountainous, and the wind rose to a murderous, screaming pitch. No one wanted any dinner—and, in fact, no meal could have been cooked in the violently pitching galley, where pots and pans noisily rattled and rolled.

I visited Blanche and Gus in their cabins. They were both miserably seasick, although Blanche bravely tried to smile at me. After wedging her into her bunk with pillows, I returned to the bridge.

Lagendijk pointed out the latest damage—a jagged hole where part of the boat deck had been torn off. In the swimming reflection of deck lights, I could see five seamen trying to fasten boards and canvas over the opening, which threatened to flood the hold beneath.

As I watched, a towering wall of blue-green water rose above the sailors. It seemed to hover interminably, and then it lunged over the men, burying them in a crash of foam.

"Hold on!" I heard myself shout. "Hold on!"

But when the *Yongmin* rose again and the water cascaded from the decks, not a man remained.

"Oh, my God!" Lagendijk groaned, wiping the seawater from his face. "Five men gone!"

I felt sick, but only for a moment. The Chinese mate groped his way onto the bridge, bringing word of a new danger. Water was pouring into the forward hold.

Lagendijk and I looked at each other, fear reflecting from

our bloodshot eyes. When the coffee beans became soaked, we both knew, they'd swell tremendously.

"They'll burst the sides of the ship!" the captain exclaimed. "The *Yongmin* will explode like a bomb!"

"How soon can we reach the islands?" I yelled.

"Not for at least another couple of hours! We'll just have to hope and pray!"

There was certainly nothing else to do. No one could now venture on deck and survive. Some of the waves were breaking against the bridge, and Lagendijk and I roped ourselves to the railing, leaving enough slack to move about.

McRae reported regularly from the engine room. The engines were doing all right, but seawater had seeped in and was splashing around the oily floor, endangering the dynamo. All the pumps were going.

About midnight a monstrous wave clawed a derrick from the foremast and flung it through the saloon wall. Following waves gushed through the gap and sent articles of furniture skipping and bobbing about the room. Outside, the last of the lifeboats broke loose and did a deadly little dance across the decks before leaping off into the storm-torn darkness.

"How far are we from the islands?" I called to Lagendijk.

"Not too far now. Get Blanche and Gus up here! They'll stand a better chance if the ship breaks up."

I untied myself and, with great difficulty, worked my way below. I found Gus in his cabin, sprawled on the bunk, awkwardly trying to tie a bulging towel around his waist.

"What are you doing?" I shouted, bracing myself in the doorway against the roll and pitch of the ship.

Gus barely glanced at me, but his eyes revealed a mixture of terror and stubbornness. "This ship is going down! My jewels aren't going down with it—I've got them here with Blanche's!"

He was deliberately saddling himself with more than 50 pounds of dead weight.

"You fool!" I yelled at him. "*You'll* go down with that stuff tied to you! Get it off!"

"Not me!" Gus finished tying the rolled towel around him and started pulling on a life jacket. There was no use arguing with him.

"Get up on the bridge!" I told him. "I'll bring Blanche."

I lurched down the corridor. The door of Blanche's cabin was swinging open and shut, and she was standing by the

bunk, steadying herself with one hand and pulling on a raincoat over her pajamas with the other. She looked relieved when she saw me and even smiled a little, as though trying to mask the fear in her eyes. As I helped her with the raincoat, she shouted, "Gus is tying the jewelry to himself! Try to stop him!"

I shook my head. "I've tried—it's no use!"

I reached for a life jacket and held it up for Blanche. At the same time, an explosive blow struck the ship. We were sent reeling across the cabin, where we banged into the wall and fell to the floor. Instinctively, fearfully, we clung to each other. The *Yongmin* rolled like a great whale, heeling so far over that the wall behind us became a floor.

I was sure this was the end. The ship shuddered repeatedly in a kind of death throes, and I expected her anguished sides to split open and let the tearing sea rush at us. The moan of timber and the battering of waves created the illusion that the tiny cabin was rolling and tossing alone on the maddened waters.

I looked at Blanche. Her face was pale and strained, but there seemed to be a strange peace in her eyes. Close to me, I heard her say, "We're not going to make it, Richard, are we?"

I held her to me fiercely. "We are! We are!"

Her face was very close now, and, tenderly, she touched her lips to mine. As she drew back, I heard her whisper something. I could only catch the words, "If we don't—"

At that moment, with a gigantic groan, the *Yongmin* rolled back and righted herself. Blanche and I were tumbled to the middle of the floor.

"Come on!" I shouted, helping her to her feet. "Now's our chance to get out of here!"

Clinging to each other, we struggled up to the bridge. Gus had roped himself to the rail in the same manner as Lagedijk, and the two were standing together in the raging darkness. I led Blanche into the charthouse, where she would be out of the wind and rain.

"Wait here," I told her, sitting her on the sofa. "Hold on to the table with one hand and steady yourself against the wall with the other. Then you won't be thrown about too much."

She smiled at me. "I'll be all right, Richard."

"Good." I stumbled out onto the bridge and joined Gus and

Lagendijk. They were clutching the rail and peering into the tormented black night.

"We're near one of the islands!" the captain yelled, pointing downward. "Look!"

I could see the boiling white surf that had engulfed the *Yongmin*. This meant that a reef was near, a new danger that could rake the bottom right off our ship.

"We'll pile up on the rocks!" I shouted to Lagendijk.

He vigorously shook his head. "No, there's an opening in the reef. I'm trying to find it by dead reckoning."

"Then you know which island this is?"

"According to the chart, its Pulau Sini. If we can get through the reef, I'll try to beach the ship."

There was no more time for talk. Lagendijk was too busy moving from the rail to the helmsman and then back to the rail, straining his eyes to see into the impossible darkness. Several times he fired flares, but in the rain they did little more than illuminate the storm with a brief, hellish glare. To those of us at the rail, the night was filled with menacing monsters, both real and imaginary.

Suddenly, in the fitful light of a flare, there was no mistaking the jagged black shape that loomed ahead. It was a large rock, rising like a vicious sea animal out of the pounding white surf!

Lagendijk roared orders. The engine telegraph rang an emergency stop, and the rattle of both anchor chains could be heard above the commotion of the storm. In the maelstrom around us, the anchors might have been made of feathers. The *Yongmin* was lifted high on the back of a wave, higher and higher and higher. We hung suspended for a terrible eternity, then dropped with a sickening crunch on the rock.

We were all flung from our feet. The ship shuddered from stem to stern, the deck planks writhed, the thick plate glass of the charthouse windows shattered, and the lights went out, except for a few emergency oil lanterns. Sprawled on the deck, half stunned, I had a confused impression of faces swimming before me. Gus's mouth was open, and his eyes bulged like a fish's. Blanche appeared in the charthouse doorway, her hair lashed about her brow, her raincoat blown open. Lagendijk had dragged himself to the speaking tube and was calling orders to the engine room below.

A moment later the engines chugged into life. The *Yongmin* trembled, throbbed, strained, and finally, with a horrible

ripping noise that meant part of her hull had been torn away, broke loose from the rock. Almost immediately the ship began to settle at the bow.

I was on my feet now, clinging to an iron stanchion. Lagen-dijk turned from the speaking tube and called to me, "A hole has been punched in the forehold! I don't know how much longer we can last!"

I looked around for Blanche. She was coming toward me across the deck, which abruptly tilted at an angle of 25 degrees. Slowly, lazily, starkly, as in a nightmare, Blanche rose and murkily floated above me. Her raincoat was pressed back by some strong yet strangely gentle force, and her pajamas fluttered about her. I reached for her, but she passed beyond my outstretched hands and disappeared.

Then I realized that I, too, was floating, rising high on the crest of a wave that had washed over the bridge. Turning and twisting, I was carried up and out into churning, watery white space. Salt water stung my nostrils, and I resisted an urge to open my mouth and gasp. Wryly, I remembered that I had neglected to put on a life jacket.

It was too late to worry. A fierce giant hand had seized me and was dragging me into the swirling depths of the sea. My shoulder slammed into the bottom, my face was scraped across abrasive sand, and my back struck a rock. I was hurled against another rock, and, capriciously, my legs were lifted high above my head. My mouth was filled with gritty substance, and my lungs were on the verge of bursting.

Desperately I lashed out with arms and legs, trying to escape from the dark fury that held me. I succeeded only in escaping into black oblivion. . . .

I awoke in flame-tinged darkness. A face was leaning over me, shadowy and wavering in the reflection of a wood fire. High above, I could see pale stars peacefully blinking.

"Thank God you're alive!" someone exclaimed.

It was McRae. I could hardly make out his battered face above me. Then I realized I could see only out of one eye. The other was puffed closed. My face was bruised, too, and my body ached with the beating I had taken in the pounding surf.

I tried my voice. It came out in a hoarse whisper. "Are the others safe?"

McRae hesitated. "I don't know. You're the only one I've found."

"We'd better look for the others." I started to sit up, but a stabbing pain in my spine forced me to fall back.

"Take it easy," McRae cautioned me. "The others will see the fire and join us."

Life was slowly seeping through me now, and I began to shiver. My clothes were still wet.

"What time is it?" I asked McRae.

"I don't know. Sometime in the middle of the night."

"Has the storm been over long?"

McRae spoke ruefully. "Quite a while. It blew itself out right after that last big wave hit the *Yongmin*."

"What happened to you?"

"Lagendijk had warned me to get the men up out of the engine room. As soon as I rushed on deck, the big wave washed me overboard. I was lucky and made it ashore."

"Where'd you find me?"

"Sprawled on the beach. You looked dead. I've been working on you for the past hour."

I edged closer to the fire, grateful for its comfort. "How'd you get this started?"

"I had some matches in a waterproof container. That's what comes from being an old pipe-smoking seadog."

I smiled. I was feeling better now and tried to sit up again. This time I made it.

I looked around. Off to the left, booming in the darkness, I could see the surf lacing the black shore. I turned to the fire, which filled the dark void about it with cheery warmth. Beyond this pleasant glow, bathed in its gentle light, lay Blanche.

The peaceful scene suddenly vanished, the nightmare starkness returned. Blanche lay still and white, her limbs oddly limp. Her eyes were closed, and her hair was scrawled across her face like seaweed. As I stared at her, the fire bit into some damp brushwood and blazed up, viciously crackling and hissing. A shower of sparks exploded into the air, like the eruption of a miniature volcano, and again I recalled the warning of Prince Adipati: that the finder of a temple treasure would be "doomed by the gods."

Blanche had found such a treasure. . . .

Dumbly, I turned to McRae. He shrugged helplessly. "I'm sorry, Richard—I didn't want to tell you. She's dead."

I repeated slowly, "Blanche . . . is . . . dead?" It was absurd, impossible. Blanche had been too full of life, too gay.

"She's dead," McRae said again with horrible finality.

The human body can take only so much punishment; the human system can stand only so much strain. Then, mercifully, shock sets in. The mind and body grow numb, insulated against horror by horror itself. I felt only a brief, sharp flash of anguish as I crawled to Blanche. I had only one weak protest left as I gathered her limp, cold body into my arms. "She's not dead. Look. Her eyelids are fluttering."

"It's only the reflection of the fire," said McRae.

He pointed to the back of Blanche's head. It had been battered to a dark, moist pulp.

I held her all through that long night, silently, numbly. As death had snatched Blanche, shock had seized me.

We buried Blanche at dawn beneath a storm-bent casuarina tree. No flowers grew by that bleak, rocky shore, and only a pair of shrieking seagulls circled overhead. McRae marked the grave with a piece of driftwood, then said a prayer. I could only stand and stare.

"Come on," McRae finally said, taking my arm. "Let's see if we can find any sign of the *Yongmin*."

There was nothing—no survivors, no wreckage, not even a trace of oil on the water. After searching the coast for hours, McRae said, "We'd better find some fresh water to drink."

We pushed inland through thorny underbrush. About mid-afternoon, in a shallow ravine, we found a brook. The clear, twinkling stream cut through red soil and revealed a gravel bed beneath. We drank away our thirst, then McRae showed me how to prod with a stick among the gravel for mussels. These we ate like oysters.

Afterward McRae stretched out in the shade for a nap, but, mechanically, I went on prodding the gravel. Occasionally I turned up the small, dark shape of a mussel shell. Automatically I lifted it from the water and placed it on shore.

As I was reaching for one dark shape, something seemed to stay my hand. I blinked and stared into the water, which had the clear, sharp quality of crystal. On the gravel bed, cleansed by the flowing stream, the dark object turned black and glistening. Subtle green flames flickered around the edges, magnified by the translucent water. I was staring at a fire pearl.

There was no doubt in my mind. I am not and never have been a superstitious man. My thought processes, by training

and inclination, are more scientific than mystic. I believe there's an explanation for everything, even matters we cannot completely understand. Our powers of reasoning, for example, are limited—but this does not mean that reason does not exist in the areas beyond our present mental bounds. Almost everyone, at one time or another, has had intimations of the unknown powers of the mind—a hunch, a foreboding, a vivid dream that turned out to be true.

Therefore, as I reached for the glistening black object in the water, I instinctively knew it was a fire pearl. Coincidence had spread beyond the sphere of chance. Gus had wished for riches—whether or not he had lived to enjoy them. Blanche, the unbeliever, had wished for nothing—and death had overtaken her. I had wished for a fire pearl—and here it was in my hand.

My shock began to crumble, releasing me from its numbing grip. The fire pearl felt strangely light, its sculptured surface filled with tremulous sparkles. It made me think of a firework I had known as a child, a "sparkler" that threw off joyous, multicolored needles of flame and yet that miraculously could be held safely in the hand. Exultantly I began to laugh.

McRae sat up, startled out of his sleep. "What's the matter?"

I couldn't tell him. I could only hold up the fire pearl, which, of course, meant nothing to him, and yell, "I've found it! I've found it!"

Then I realized what the cost had been. Free of shock and vulnerable to the full, tragic force of Blanche's death, I was overwhelmed by grief. Remorse choked off my laughter, and I broke down and wept, racked by great, bitter sobs.

McRae thought I had gone mad. Actually, I had come back to sanity.

That evening McRae and I reached a fishing village at the far end of the island. We spent the night in a native hut and the next morning were taken to the nearby island of Billiton. There, with the help of some Dutch tin miners, we obtained passage to Singapore.

Our ship docked at Keppel Harbor. Berthed almost next to it was a battered, mangled, salt-crusted wreck—the remains of the *Yongmin*. The astonishment of McRae and myself was no greater than that of Legendijk. When we

hurried aboard the *Yongmin*, he stared at us as though we had returned from the dead.

His story, after we got it out of him, was as strange as ours. The backwash of the great wave that had swept Blanche, McRae, and myself overboard had actually yanked the *Yongmin* clear of the reef off Pulau Sini.

Ironically, the coffee beans—which we had feared would swell and burst the sides of the ship—had, in fact, saved the vessel. The swollen beans had partly plugged the hole in the forward hold, enabling the pumps to cope with the water that seeped through. The storm had abated, and the *Yongmin* had managed to limp into Singapore.

Lagendijk was unhurt. He and Gus had been saved by the ropes holding them to the bridge rail. Gus, however, had suffered a broken arm and was in Singapore General Hospital.

When I visited him, I found Gus lying in bed, looking pale and worried. His first question was about Blanche. As gently as I could, I told him of her death. Gus turned from me and wept.

There was nothing I could say or do. I had gone through this agony myself, and I knew Gus had to find his own way out of it. I went away.

The next day, when I returned to the hospital, Gus looked spent and bitter.

"I've had enough of this rotten part of the world," he told me. "I'm going back to Europe. Are you coming?"

I shook my head. "No, there are still some things I want to do here."

"All right," Gus said. "I've put your share of the treasure in a safe place. You can have it whenever you want."

"I don't want it," I told him. "Keep it. You wished for it."

Gus flared up. "Damn you, don't blame me for what happened! We were all in on it—Blanche, too! I'm turning over her share of the treasure to her family in Paris—and you're going to take yours!"

"All right," I said, trying to calm him. "All right, whatever you say."

Later, when Gus seemed more relaxed, I told him of the fire pearl I had found. He just stared at me.

"Would you like to see it?" I asked.

His face wrenched with pain and anger. "No! Don't come near me with that filthy rock! If it weren't for it—and if it

weren't for that crazy search of yours—Blanche would still be alive!"

I refrained from pointing out that it was he who had insisted on Blanche's accompanying us. There was nothing more to say. I got up and left.

A few days later Gus sailed for Europe.

CHAPTER XVIII

I was not certain why I had stayed in Singapore. I only had a feeling that, even though I had found an *Agni Mani*, my quest was not complete. There remained too many questions unanswered, too many issues unresolved. The fire pearl in itself meant nothing. The truth behind it—which still eluded me—meant everything.

Then, too, on a more personal plane, I was haunted by the tragedy of Blanche. I had to find some justification for her death. I could not believe—I could not bear to believe—that she had been sacrificed to some meaningless black stone. I had to search further—but where I did not know.

The way was pointed out to me one day in a Singapore gem shop. I had gone there to have my fire pearl set in the ancestral ring I wore. The jeweler, a white-haired old Hindu, handled the fire pearl with reverence. His eyes were deep and soft as he looked at me and said, "This is a most precious stone. . . ."

The words were familiar. As I gazed at the Hindu, I seemed to be transported back along a bright corridor of time. I saw again the white hair and soft dark eyes of the Yogi, Ram Gyani, and I heard him prophesy—oh, so many years before—that the amethyst in my ring would be replaced by another stone, "the most precious of all. . . ."

Coincidence? Insight? Mysticism? Magic?

I didn't know—but now I did know how I was going to try to find out. I sold the *Yongmin* and my share of the temple treasure and, with the proceeds, set out on a quest for knowledge and understanding. For the next few years I traveled to and studied at Oriental centers of science, philosophy, art, history, archaeology, mineralogy and astrology. My fire

pearl was a kind of passport. In Tibet, for instance, Buddhist priests bowed before it in worship, and, as the sacred gem's owner, I was an honored guest in monasteries throughout that then little-known country.

Some of my studies were pursued in such monasteries, and, inevitably, my quest took on spiritual as well as scholarly aspects. I do not mean this in a religious sense. I am speaking, rather, of a search into the unexplored regions of the spirit and mind—the unknown areas that too many Occidentals shun or laugh off as the dark breeding grounds of Oriental mysticism, superstition, and magic.

More often than not, such attitudes arise from ignorance or a superficial acquaintance with the tricks of bazaar fakirs. Let me emphasize that I did not seek enlightenment from fortune-tellers or the gaudy charlatans who sometimes—and with great commercial success—invade the Western world to peddle their mystic rubbish. I went instead to dedicated scientists and scholars who, in the case of the mysterious *Agni Mani*, among others, had found the truth long before their Occidental counterparts.

For example, in an Indian astronomy center, I was shown how meteors strike the moon, dislodging particles which, in rare instances, plunge to earth. In a mineralogical institute I offered my fire pearl for examination. It was found to contain traces of gold, silver, copper, and lead—minerals which do not exist on Pulau Sini, where the stone was found. This, to me, was proof enough that the fire pearl had indeed come from an extra-terrestrial source. If that source was the moon, then it would prove that gold, silver, copper, and lead existed on that virtually unknown planet.

These were typical results of my practical research. On the spiritual side, I learned how to concentrate, to meditate, to find greater truths in concrete facts. The mind, I discovered, can move beyond the limitations—or, at least, the limitations most of us have accepted—of perception and insight.

Lest this sound too much like legerdemain, let me explain how it was accomplished. My tutor was a kindly Chinese scholar, elderly but keen-minded, who only incidentally was a Buddhist priest. His name was Kim Faye. Our classroom was a cool, tranquil annex to a temple.

Buddhism varies throughout the East, but basically it is a doctrine of gentleness. Through *Karma*—sacrifices and gifts to the memory of Buddha—and *Satipathana*—concen-

trated meditation—Buddhists strive for *Nirvana*, a personal triumph of faith. It was *Satipathana*, the Buddhist form of disciplined meditation and mind control, that interested me.

I sat cross-legged beside Kim Faye on the pink tile floor. Like all Buddhist priests, Kim had his hair and eyebrows shaved off, and his smooth round face was as ageless and peaceful as the moon. He spoke fluent English, and one of the first things I remember him telling me was:

"A clear, calm mind, like a clear, calm spring, reveals the greatest depth. Our first aim, therefore, is for mental clarity and calmness."

He explained this by saying:

"Our brains are like fishing nets. With them, we set out to catch the fish of wisdom. Instead, too often, we haul in a collection of seaweed, tin cans, junk, old shoes, and poisonous snakes. What, then, is the sensible thing to do? Why, clear the net, of course.

"But sometimes we are lazy or indifferent—or we grow addicted to the junk of undigested lumps of learning in our minds, the old shoes of past deeds dead and best forgotten, the snarled seaweed of envious dreams, the poisonous snakes of hateful thought. We just drag on and on until the nets of our minds become hopelessly fouled. Our first job, therefore, is to clear the mind."

As "homework," I was told to concentrate solely on whatever I was doing from the moment I rose from bed until I was dressed. While I was shaving, I was to think only of shaving. While I was bathing, I was to think only of bathing. While I was putting on my clothes, I was to think only of putting on my clothes.

This may sound like an easy thing to do. Actually, it was a minor form of torture. Millions of petty, screaming, irrelevant thoughts kept assaulting my brain. As soon as I fought off one lot, another would come clamoring to the attack. There was a definite, deliberate rebellion within my mind against what I was trying to make it do. It took me weeks to put down that rebellion.

"The point is," Kim Faye told me, "this concentration of the mind on simple matters is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end—mental discipline. Now that you can control your mind on simple matters, we can move on to greater issues. Just remember: *You* must master your mind; your mind must never master you."

"But is not your mind you?" I asked.

Kim shook his head. "No, there is a higher, truer, purer plane of existence. There is a greater *you* beyond your mind."

This was not clear to me at the time, but later, in more advanced stages of instruction, I achieved moments of meditation that bordered on exaltation. I actually seemed raised above my mind and body. I perceived points of view that had hitherto been hidden to me. I saw truth revealed beyond veils of doubt, beauty shining behind clouds of darkness.

These moments, although fleeting, had an eternity-like quality. At times they seemed to form a shimmering corridor of thought leading endlessly up and on into another world, brilliant and alluring. I never traveled the full length of that bright corridor. Something held me back—perhaps a satisfaction with what I had already achieved, perhaps a reluctance to pursue my intellectual curiosity too far.

Kim Faye understood my hesitation. "You are not prepared to accept *Nirvana*," he explained. "It is too alien to your nature, your upbringing, your European background. You cannot completely accept the principles joining the individual to the infinite. Nevertheless, from what you have learned, I believe you will greatly benefit."

This was true. I had lost my restlessness and uncertainty. I had found serenity of spirit and clarity of mind. Through the *Agni Mani* . . . I had found myself.

I finally ran out of money. I was in India at the time, literally down to my last dollar, with no prospects of a job and the whole world plunged into the economic depression of the 1930s. Yet, for no reason that I could see, a rich plum was dropped into my lap. I was given the agency for a newly perfected product that has since revolutionized life in the tropics—air-conditioning. I expanded the business throughout the Orient and prospered greatly.

I make no claim that this good fortune was due to any "magic" quality of my *Agni Mani*. Luck, I believe, is a kind of chemistry—a sort of self-confidence or courage. Some people have it, some don't. I may have acquired a sense of confidence through the fact that I possessed the *Agni Mani*, and this might have generated in me the chemistry of luck.

I don't know. I only know that fortune continued to favor me. I had the time, money, and opportunity to pursue my in-

terests in art, archaeology, mineralogy, exploration, and the *Agni Mani*.

In 1939, quite by accident, I met a Dutch tin miner from Billiton, the island not far from Pulau Sini, where I had found my *Agni Mani*. The miner became interested in my fire pearl and told me, "I've seen stones like this before. The natives on Billiton call them 'magic black seeds.' They find them on the surface, then bury them. They believe the 'magic seeds' will grow tin and thus ensure the prosperity of the island."

I immediately organized an expedition and sailed to Billiton. Sure enough, on leads furnished by the natives, a handful of fire pearls were unearthed—also, I might add, on an island where neither gold, silver, copper, nor lead is found. These stones, now technically known as Billitonites, formed a collection about which I wrote and lectured for years. It was not until after World War II, however, that scientists in Europe and America became interested enough to take up the serious study of fire pearls—or tektites, as the stones came to be less romantically labeled.

Meanwhile, during the war I lived in Bombay, India, where I did intelligence work for the Allied forces. It was during this time that I presented one of my fire pearls to the Allied Supreme Commander in Southeast Asia, Lord Louis Mountbatten. I do not claim that the smashing military success that followed was due to the *Agni Mani*. That would obviously be nonsense. I only mention the fact that the successful leader possessed—and still possesses—a fire pearl. Similar stones were presented by me to those other successful international figures—Sir Winston Churchill and Queen Elizabeth of England.

My own life, I must mention, was once saved by the *Agni Mani* in my ring. It happened in Bombay in 1944, when a shipload of explosives blew up in the harbor. As I raced to the scene in my car, my attention was caught by the *Agni Mani*. It was acting like an agitated living thing. The green flames had turned to red and were urgently flashing, much in the manner of an emergency stop signal.

I felt an immediate premonition of danger. Without thinking, I swung the car around and sped away from the dock area, which was promptly rocked by another blast. Scores of people were killed in the very spot where I had turned around.

Had my *Agni Mani* flashed me a supernatural signal of warning? Again, I don't know. The supernatural, when man eventually gets around to understanding it, may turn out to be merely an extension of the natural. In this particular instance, I later figured out, the red light in my fire pearl had been a reflection of the setting sun.

After the war I migrated to the United States. I went into business as a marketing management executive, specializing in world trade, and became an American citizen. In my spare time I wrote and lectured on fire pearls.

Gradually, leading scientists and scientific institutions became convinced that I knew what I was talking about. My collection of fire pearls was studied with interest by such outstanding organizations as the Smithsonian Institution—which later started a tektite collection of its own.

Life Magazine photographed my collection, and I was approached for lectures, articles, or information by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, the American Museum of Natural History, the Mineralogical Society of America, the American Meteorite Museum, the Hayden Planetarium, Harvard College Observatory, and the National Science Foundation. Accounts of the discovery of my original *Agni Mani* also appeared in several national publications.

Interest in my fire pearls finally became so great that I had an analysis made by the Lucius Pitkin Company, metallurgical chemists with offices in New York. This conclusively proved there were gold, silver, copper, and lead in the fire pearls. The lunar origin of the stones was definitely established by Dr. Harvey Nininger, Director of the American Meteorite Association.

If there was any doubt left, it was wiped away in 1957 by the Smithsonian Institution Astrophysical Observatory. In a long, published report this astute body summed up by declaring, "Chemical evidence suggests that tektites must come from an extra-terrestrial source, among which the moon is an acceptable one. Astronomical considerations prove that the moon is a very likely source compatible with the observed distribution of tektites on the earth's surface." Occidental scientists, in brief, had finally caught up with an Oriental "superstition" thousands of years old.

Now began a worldwide scramble to collect the sparse deposits of fire pearls on the earth's surface. Only about

once in a hundred years, it was established, does a meteor strike the moon with sufficient force to send a shower of tektites to earth. The stones come down in localized areas and have been found in Indonesia, Texas, Indochina, the Philippines, Australia, and Czechoslovakia. Although the Billitonites, such as I originally found, are predominantly black, other specimens of tektites are brown or green.

The value of these "chips from the moon" in research on outer space was immediately recognized, and all the leading powers now have collections of their own. To assist in the gathering and analysis of fire pearls for American interests, I recently formed an incorporated organization known as Moon Metals and Minerals. Its findings, particularly those pertaining to the composition of the moon's surface, are being turned over to scientists striving to solve the mysteries of outer space.

This, I believe, is the ultimate justification—the true meaning and purpose—of my youthful search for an *Agni Mani*. For today my odyssey of yesteryear is contributing to man's great venture of tomorrow: the first trip to the moon.

WHAT IS THE FIRE PEARL

Present day scientists know them as “tek-tites” — and theorize that they may originate from cataclysmic events on the Moon; lunar matter, destined to orbit our world until, shaped in the fiery crucible of our atmosphere, a scattering of drops may descend to the Earth’s surface.

But in the East, this legendary stone has been worshipped for centuries — one ancient name in Sanskrit is **Agni Mani**, “teardrop from the Moon.” In India, China, Java, Tibet, all over the far East, the fire pearl is regarded as sacred, having magic properties. It is kept secretly, and carefully guarded.

This is the stone that Richard de Touché-Skadding set out to find by himself. The tale of his adventures is matched only by the magic myths of Agni Mani, the fire pearl.